

Pastoral Care with Stepfamilies

Pastoral Care with Stepfamilies



Mapping the Wilderness

LOREN L. TOWNSEND



ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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PREFACE

Last year I was invited to speak to a church evangelism committee about how the church can reach stepfamilies. During the consultation, I noticed an odd, recurrent pattern of speech. Every reference to stepfamilies was articulated in nouns and verbs that placed them outside the church and beyond the usual reach of ministry. “They” were “out there.” “They” were strangers by whom congregational leaders and pastors were confused and disoriented. Oddly, when I asked if the church had among its membership any divorced and remarried people, I was quickly told about several families that had come to the staff’s attention amid a church of hundreds. Because of the pastoral care problems they presented, they were known to be stepfamilies. The staff acknowledged that they had little sense about how to respond to these families, and they could point to few positive outcomes of their intervention. Clearly, the divorced and remarried families to whom they referred were the “other” who did not fit easily into congregational life or usual pastoral care strategies. After considerable thought, the church staff remembered two church leaders who each had long ago been divorced and remarried. However, since each of them appeared to have an effective family life, the staff had never really considered either of their families as stepfamilies.

In fact, the ministry team with which I consulted was partly right. Stepfamilies *are* mostly “out there.” They are separated from full inclusion in the life of the church even when they are members of a congregation. Divorced and remarried families are *different* from traditional families we have come to know and with whom we have learned to minister. Their internal and intergenerational processes are different, and their needs are different. Successful stepfamilies look different than successful nuclear families. These pastors had a right to be confused.

Because of changes in family demographics over the past 30 years, congregations must now take stepfamilies seriously. They are with us and are

important members of the body of Christ. They have a significant contribution to make to our understanding of the image of God in humanity. They have gifts for the ministry and mission of the church, and they need care. Most important, they are no longer “they”; they are “us.” It is the task of the church at the turn of the millennium to make theological sense of stepfamily life and, out of this understanding, begin to build systems of care that can respond to stepfamily reality.

The stepfamily pilgrimage leads through wild and unknown territory. Often there are no companions, no maps, and no reliable compass. Clouds dim any sense of direction from guiding stars or faithful sun. To live in a stepfamily requires improvisation, creativity, and the fortitude to start over when the illusion of a path ends at a rocky cliff. A wilderness provides unknown challenges. Today’s survival may require picking carefully through dense brush to arrive safely at a small clearing promising some rest. Tomorrow’s journey may require desert survival along a path littered with the desiccated remains of past travelers, which shatter all hope of finding water or shade. Other days, the beauty of the wilderness is beyond compare and “challenge” is meaningless.

Stepfamilies live in a wilderness land. They must learn to survive and orient when the landscape is unfamiliar. They must learn to build homes where they are strangers and aliens. Ministry with stepfamilies is a corresponding wilderness trek. Familiar tools of family ministry break when used in this uncultivated land; old or intuitive maps fail to show the land’s contours accurately. Compasses are pulled off-course by emotional fields distorting a sense of direction. Yet the church’s directive is ministry to the homeless and to those whose hope has failed.

Ministry with stepfamilies begins in companionship on this wilderness journey. There is no sure path. There is no sure end. There is only God’s promised presence. “Never curse your wilderness” stated an African American minister in a pastoral-counseling seminar. It is a place of burning bushes and water that springs from rocks. It’s a place where demons show their hands and temptations glow in raw appeal. Wilderness is a place of formation that pits hope against despair and God’s promise against annihilation. It’s a place where unexpected companions suddenly appear, where angels sustain those who faint, and the quiet voice of God is heard. Hope and a theological identity are formed in a wilderness where no map can guide, no well-used trails appear, and no guiding star points the way.

This book assumes that God has called congregations and caring ministers to accompany stepfamilies into wilderness. It is written to pastors, pastoral care specialists, church leaders, and seminary students, and claims a threefold agenda. My first purpose is to highlight and outline primary

themes in American culture and stepfamily life that characterize how divorced and remarried families depart from expected nuclear family norms. We must understand this “differentness,” or “otherness,” if we are to begin any theological interpretation of stepfamilies that can guide pastoral care. Chapters 1 and 2 describe the religious and social location of stepfamilies in a culture dominated by nuclear family norms. Chapters 4 through 7 identify core stepfamily experiences and are meant to help the reader attend carefully to stepfamily voices. Careful listening anchors twin theological tasks: interpreting with stepfamilies their place in the community of faith and providing congregational care.

A second purpose of this book is to describe a model of reflective care that grounds companionship with stepfamilies. The method I propose in chapter 3 begins in stepfamily experience and insists that the church itself be affected by stepfamily stories in a way that demands interpretation, theological discovery, and creative pastoral care. This method attends to individual families, but also calls the church to prophetic advocacy against those social, cultural, and religious powers that disenfranchise and subjugate stepfamily hope.

This text is not intended to be a hopeful, helpful, how-to manual for pastors who want to apply ready-made solutions to their “stepfamily problem” or problem stepfamilies. Neither is it an authoritative last word about what stepfamilies need or what specific actions a church should take with remarried families. Stepfamilies are far too diverse for a “cookbook” approach to pastoral care. Congregational cultures vary so widely that recipes are of little value. Instead, congregations must learn to listen to the depth of stepfamily stories and engage them toward wholeness and restoration.

In these chapters I hope to articulate the cutting edge of stepfamily hope and pain. Using a speculative case study in chapter 8, I also hope to demonstrate a method that roots congregational care in the constructive theological imagination of individual congregations and the whole community of faith. In this process, the church’s understanding of God grows, and its mission is refined. At the same time, stepfamilies are engaged in their unique strengths and needs rather than treated like recycled nuclear families, with whom we are more familiar.

Stepfamilies are with us and will continue to be with us. They are us. Including stepfamilies fully in the life of the church requires a theological interpretation of divorced and remarried families and a moral vision for stepfamily life. My final agenda for this book is experimental and propositional. If we bring stepfamily experience into constructive dialogue with the church and its faith resources, what might the result of this theological and mutually informative task look like? Chapter 9 draws together four

inchoate dialogical themes around which constructive theological discourse can organize. This conversation is the task immediately in front of a church concerned with caring for stepfamilies and facilitating their full participation in the body of Christ. In the last analysis, this work is intended to be one that names the reality of stepfamily life and then points to hope manifested in the community of Christ.

As a pastor, theologian, pastoral counselor, divorced person, husband, father, and stepfather, I am unable to approach any pastoral consideration of stepfamilies with anything less than passion. I have lived a stepfamily life for many years and have experienced firsthand its pain, joy, success, and failure. It is not only “they” who are marginalized by public policy, social climate, and religious prejudice, it is also me and mine. To live in a stepfamily is to live on uncertain cultural ground, whether it be as an American subject to unpredictable judicial processes or as a church member whose family at times bears the blame for a variety of ills and then fits neatly into the blind spots of a congregation’s nuclear family vision. To tell parts of the stepfamily story in this book is also to share fragments of my own, my children’s, and my stepchildren’s story. Consequently, an element of passion is unavoidable. I would want it no other way.

This book was made possible by many people. I first want to express my thanks to Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and its board of directors, who supported my research and granted me sabbatical leave to complete this work. Countless clients and workshop participants confidentially provided words, ideas, and the raw experience of stepfamily life. I owe them a debt of gratitude for their anonymous voices and stories. Without the privilege of their trust and their courage to share, I would have few words but my own.

Becky Timerding, administrative assistant for Louisville Seminary’s Marriage and Family Therapy Program, deserves special praise for her contribution to this book. Without her sentinel spirit posted daily at my office door, the monotonous rhythms of office life would have spirited away all creative inspiration. To my colleagues who gave their time in conversation and in reading unrefined manuscript pages (Leslie Smith Kendrick, John McClure, and Brad Wigger) and to those who gave the gift of encouragement (Nancy Ramsay, Larry Graham, Gene March, and Diane Reistroffer), I also offer my deep thanks.

Finally, I want to offer special thanks to my children, Nathan and Leslea, who have shared a journey with me and have taught me more about stepfamily life than I ever wanted to know. They are testimonies to faithfulness, resilience, and God’s gift of hope. I want to express my gratitude to my wife and colleague Leslie Smith Kendrick and my stepdaughters, Sarah and Chelsea, who continue to teach me how to be a stepfather.



PART ONE
Foundations

Chapter 1

A Glimpse of the Landscape

A Stepfamily's Story

Ron and Julie Brown joined their suburban church soon after marrying two years ago. They wanted to start their marriage in a congregation they had chosen together. This was a second marriage for both, and they wanted things to go well. Ron had been divorced for two years and Julie for four when the couple married. Ron has two children from his first marriage—a daughter, thirteen, and a son, ten. His children spend every other weekend, alternating holidays, and some summer vacation with him. Those who know Ron have heard his story of an expensive, bloody divorce and the abusive child support payments he makes monthly to an undeserving ex-wife. Ron was not able to recover financially in the two years between divorce and remarriage, and brought significant debt into his new relationship.

Julie has three children from her previous marriage—two sons, fifteen and nine, and one daughter, age seven. Only those closest to her know that she was first married at eighteen. For twelve years she was a homemaker in a traditional marriage that ended suddenly when her husband left her for a younger woman. Julie doesn't like to talk about losing her home or about her poverty after the divorce. She is embarrassed about how she had to live for four years as a single parent. She is unable to collect her court-ordered child support, but she is not legally allowed to deny her husband his rights to visitation. She knows Ron resents this.

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Pastor Smith first saw Ron and Julie as typical newlyweds. The couple lived with some tension, but they were also filled with hope. They seemed to be a model blended family. Like many new church members with strong religious backgrounds, the couple had shown promise as leaders. But over the last two years, they had become ambivalent about church commitments. Given the pressure of dual working schedules and school activities, the pastoral staff did not find this unusual.

During lunch one day, pastor Smith met Julie at a local deli. Tearfully, Julie told pastor Smith that she and Ron were in the final stages of divorce. In a story punctuated by anger and sorrow, Julie told of shattered dreams, the illusion of a second chance, and the pain she and Ron had endured over the last two years. She was angry with her pastors and church. Not only was the church unsupportive, but she felt the church had actively discouraged her stepfamily from becoming involved. Lack of a supportive religious community, she felt, had contributed to her family's failure. Pastor Smith was shocked by Julie's disclosure and left the encounter confused, angry, and hurt.

At the next staff meeting, Pastor Smith told her colleagues about her conversation. After much discussion, the group concluded that they had done everything possible to treat the Browns like any other family. They had not been excluded, nor had the church acted with discrimination. Ron and Julie had rarely attended programs meant to support church families. How did they expect to benefit if they did not attend? The staff concluded that had the couple been more forthcoming with their pain, they might have been referred to a pastoral counselor for family therapy. Instead, they hid their pain and had not made themselves available for help. Now pastors and church members were targets for Julie's anger and grief.

In follow-up visits, pastor Smith listened as Julie and Ron talked about their experience. She heard several themes. First, stepfamily living was difficult and often painful. Both felt it remarkable that their problems had been "invisible" to church leadership. Why had no one asked about Rob's thirteen-year-old daughter when she acted out in Sunday school? No one seemed to care that Julie's nine-year-old son was repeating third grade or that Ron and Julie were rarely together at church gatherings. Ron mused at one point that their family was so second-class that God hadn't even bothered to provide help. Even the marriage and parenting programs offered by the church offered little for their stepfamily. When they followed the advice given by speakers and family-life literature, their problems usually increased. Where was the Christian promise of redemption and renewal for divorced and remarried families? He could not recall ever hearing a sermon or Sunday school lesson about this.

Julie was particularly angry about her children. What guidance was there from the church? How were they supposed to live out so-called Christian parenting when their children lived in two separate homes and were accountable to four parents? Where was God's presence in the loyalty conflicts that were so real to their life and with their children? What images of God's grace were their children going to internalize?

In different conversations, Ron and Julie told pastor Smith how excluded they felt in regular church activities. Their children were not chosen for parts in plays and musical productions because visitation schedules resulted in unpredictable attendance. Likewise, their names were often left off play or musical programs when they did participate. This was explained, of course, by the fact that leaders were not certain they were truly taking part. Ultimately, the children felt they had no friends and no connection with the church. They did not want to attend. Ron and Julie felt unsupported in providing religious education and a spiritual foundation for their children.

Pastor Smith listened as Ron talked about his isolation. As a couple, he and Julie were never able to build close relationships with people in whom they could confide. Part of the problem was time. Ron worked excessively to support a complex family budget and to manage visitation schedules. However, church programs themselves seemed designed to undergird the needs of families made up of first-married couples and their children. It was hard to talk about their experience as a couple who had been divorced and remarried. It was hard to share the complex feelings about living with children biologically related to one parent, but not to the other. No one, it seemed, understood their stress as they tried to nurture a marriage with no time alone. No one noticed how they tried to hold a new family together in very trying circumstances. Or no one chose to respond.

By the end of several visits, pastor Smith began to wonder about ministry to stepfamilies. Was the church somehow missing the needs of these nontraditional families? Could this relate to the declining church membership that so concerned her staff and denomination?

Stepfamilies and Contemporary Life

Voltaire once quipped that divorce was invented about the same time as marriage—about two weeks later, to be exact. In some form, divorce has existed in all human cultures. However, American social patterns centralize divorce in an uncommon way. It is imbedded so deeply in the laws, institutions, manners, and mores of contemporary American life that social critics have labeled ours a “divorce culture.” It is the logical outcome, some claim, of a society dominated by an ethic of self-devotion brewed over the years

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from American individualism, social policies, and political philosophies. Divorce has emerged in the latter part of this century as a powerful institution more likely to govern family relationships than either marriage or individual obligation to family and society.¹

Amid increasing prosperity and sweeping cultural changes, divorce became an increasingly common lifestyle choice among Americans in the decades following World War II. Census figures show that the number of divorces per year in the United States tripled between 1962 and 1982.² By the mid-1980s, social scientists could predict that as many as 65 percent of all marriages would end in divorce.³ Trends over the past decade show that divorce is likely to remain a lifestyle choice of about half of all young adults.⁴ This pattern is difficult to ignore. It marks a radical change in American family life and represents a cultural shift in a population's values, self-understanding and community mores.

Most young Americans are likely to be affected by divorce. Demographers project that one of every two children born after 1980 will experience the end of their parents' marriage before their eighteenth birthday.⁵ Research suggests that children of divorce experience a constellation of emotional, developmental, and social vulnerabilities as a result of their parents' decision. Furthermore, most divorced people remarry and form stepfamilies. And like children of divorce, stepfamily children live with their own social, emotional, and developmental vulnerabilities. If current trends continue, remarried families will outnumber intact first-marriage families by the year 2010. More than half of all Americans now living will become either stepchildren, stepparents, or stepgrandparents during the course of their lifetimes.⁶

Stepfamilies are part of a cultural revolution in contemporary America. Though they are becoming a new "norm," we have little sense of what it means to live as a stepfamily. Popular wisdom provides two attitudes. On one hand, we are lured by a shimmering, highly optimistic mirage of stepfamily possibility in motivational literature and pop psychology. On

¹Barbara Whitehead, *The Divorce Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

²U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Marital statistics and living arrangement: March, 1982*, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 380 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983).

³T. Castro Martin and L. Bumpass, "Trends in Marital Disruption," *Demography* 26 (1989): 37–52.

⁴Paul Glick, "How American Families are Changing," *American Demographics* (January, 1984); Paul Glick "Remarried Families, Stepfamilies, and Children: A Brief Demographic Profile," *Family Relations* 38 (1989): 24–27.

⁵David Popenoe, "The Evolution of Marriage and the Problem of Stepfamilies: A Biosocial Perspective," in *Stepfamilies: Who benefits? Who does not?* ed. Alan Booth and Judy Dunn (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994).

⁶Emily Visher and John Visher, *Therapy with Stepfamilies* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1996); Glick, "Remarried Families."

the other hand, accounts of stepfamily life billed as “realistic” show a shadow of impossible problems and clinical symptoms for stepfamilies. Neither of these are true to the hazy stepfamily picture developing in social science research and experience, and neither offers genuine hope to the millions of people who experience divorce and long for a second chance through remarriage.

In part, hope for divorced and remarrying families rests in a healing vision of stepfamily life that can be lived in a supportive community of faith. Nuclear families are connected to this community naturally through multiple generations of support, acceptance, and strong lines of tradition. They are familiar, and the church has attended carefully to them in its theology, teaching, and care. This is not so for stepfamilies. They are new and unfamiliar. They are theological and congregational misfits with strong negative cultural traditions and little hope of easy connection with the community of faith. It is only since the 1970s that stepfamilies have been a serious area of study for the social sciences, a task which has yet to begin for theological disciplines. At the turn of the millennium, we are just beginning to understand some of the experiences, nature, and processes of stepfamilies.

Stepfamilies in Memory and Imagination

Divorce, remarriage, and stepfamilies may be a new social norm, but prejudices about these families run deep in our cultural heritage. Most of us grew up with fairy tales and stories featuring the treachery of wicked stepmothers. The wonder of Disney animation has gifted young children with an attachment to these stories that captivates their imaginations and affects. Everyone, it seems, can feel the effects of the vicious perversion of twisted motherhood portrayed by the remarried despot who intends harm to the father’s children. Generations of children have identified with Cinderella, Snow White, and Hansel and Gretel, stories that all star unhappy children abused by stepmothers. In each case, a happy ending requires the demise of the stepchild-stepmother relationship, accomplished either by stepchildren’s wily manipulation or the appearance of a mythical figure (such as a prince or fairy godmother) who heals the wound imposed by stepfamily living and returns the biological father to his senses. Father, after all, has been helpless, impotent, and blinded by the evil spell of stepmotherhood.

A few counseling sessions with stepfamilies will confirm that the wicked stepmother myth is pervasive. It directs both a child’s expectation and a woman’s self-image as the stepmother tries to relate to a child who is biologically not her own. Deep-seated prejudices emerge when remarried women are asked to perform as they have been socialized—as household

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leaders, child caretakers, and limit-setters. As a pastoral family therapist, I have often heard the tears of frustrated, wounded women living in stepfamilies. Jan, a 42-year-old stepmother of her husband's three children said in one counseling session:

I've tried so hard. We moved into a house together. We wanted to make it a home. We set up rules and schedules. We divided chores and tried to make expectations clear. The kids resented me from the beginning. If anything went wrong, it was my fault. If they had a chore, it wasn't Dad who was forcing them into slavery, it was me. When they were grounded, I was the one ruining their life. Of course, I was the one with the most daily contact with them, so I had to be the enforcer. It was so hard, but I stayed with it. I nursed them through sickness. I gave them lunch money. His oldest daughter is thirteen, and I drive her around like a chauffeur. After two years, I'm still "that woman," or "Dad's wife." I am the wicked stepmother. Any conflict with the kids, and dad comes running to rescue them from the wicked witch. I am so tired. I'm ready to quit.

Beyond stepmother prejudice, our Western heritage also provides us with deep-seated beliefs that stepfamilies will be dysfunctional. We expect self-centered stepsiblings (usually mother's emotionally overindulged children) and under-functioning fathers. "Stepchild" is synonymous with "waif" and is such an intensely biased notion that it is reserved to describe marginality, oppression, and a beggar's place in whatever good is being distributed. Moreover, negative judgments about divorced people abound, even though the odds are that most Americans will eventually be divorced. Divorced individuals are prejudged by popular and psychotherapeutic communities to be: (a) immersed in and controlled by a culture that precludes the possibility of long-term commitment; (b) self-involved narcissists unable to look beyond their own desires in order to preserve offspring and society; (c) victims rescued from the evolving abuse of bad marital choice; (d) heroic scavengers of their own personal and emotional growth from the despair of nonproductive relationships; or (e) any combinations of the above. None of these captures the complexity of every divorce, nor do any reflect the depth of divorced people's experiences.

When prejudice about divorce is added to the modern stepfamily equation, popular symbols of stepfamily life reflect deep hopelessness. Today's books and movies augment the wicked stepmother and impotent father of fairy tales with images of modern children abandoned to their own devices by self-serving mothers and fathers. In this new mythology, children raise their parents, and stepfathers molest their stepchildren. Social critics, news

media, and popular talk shows portray children of divorce and remarriage as failing, acting out, and a burden to public and private resources. Daily we are convinced that you can't expect the best from children of "broken homes." Divorced and remarried families do not even get the dangerous model of the Brady Bunch and their instant love. The Bradys, after all, are a stepfamily because of death, not divorce.

These inescapable prejudices are embedded in our twentieth century literature, cinema, and popular wisdom. They impact family well-being first by determining how divorced and remarried families think of themselves, and then by influencing how stepfamilies are integrated unconsciously into communal life. Such prejudice not only disrupts a family's relational life but also has a far-reaching effect on how these families are included in the healing and redemptive life of the body of Christ. Consider a stepfamily searching for religious life in a congregation. What becomes of an inclusive invitation to the community of faith when worship leaders naively unfold biblical texts and cultural traditions that equate good families with nuclear families? Or imagine a remarried couple seeing a pastoral counselor because of marital or stepchild problems. How will they respond to unconscious assumptions and unexamined religious teachings that suggest that the divorced and remarried are incapable of the spiritual depth, love, or level of commitment typical of the first-married? Prejudicial attitudes, or silence where there is no prejudice, undermine stepfamilies' ability to find a place at Christ's table. Without an invitation actively including them, prejudice will endure and stepfamilies will be excluded.

Stepfamilies and Models of Help

Stepfamilies are complex, particularly when they are formed as the result of divorce and remarriage. What help is available? Certainly counseling and family therapy is helpful for those stepfamilies able to afford it or who are symptomatic. In the last decade a popular self-help literature has found its way to stepfamilies. Although this may signal an end to years of invisibility and a beginning for more positive images of stepfamilies, it also presents a problem. Much of this literature accentuates a simplistic, overly hopeful, and encouraging view of stepfamily life that fails to account for the radically painful experience that most encounter. Remarried families begin in loss and grief, which quickly overwhelms overly hopeful couples. Those expecting to make sense easily of their experience find themselves feeling isolated, discouraged, and unsuccessful. Self-help models generally fail to attend to long-term pervasive grief or the fact that remarriage and "blending" families will be the hardest job any family ever attempts. From statistics alone, stepfamily living is a high-risk adventure. Though census

information is difficult to interpret, it is likely that less than 30 percent of all stepfamilies will survive into long-term family life. Fifteen percent of all children will live through at least two family breakups before age eighteen.⁷

Contracting for an adventure survived by less than half the participants could be seen as either insane or foolhardy. Public interest is riveted by adventures gone awry, such as guided trips to Mount Everest that result in death or defeat for a few intrepid personalities. This is the stuff of best-selling books and questions about why otherwise sensible people try such foolhardy adventures, though most climbers survive the trek and better than half eventually stand on the summit. Of course, these planned adventures are limited in scope, confront known hazards, and allow prior training and well-developed technical information and support. Only foolishness or insanity would point a weekend jogger toward the ceiling of the world equipped only with street shoes and a spring jacket. Remarrying couples, however, often embark on a trip to an uncharted wilderness with inadequate information, ill-fitting equipment, little training, and no support for the hazards along the way. Given the resources available, there is little choice except to take risks that would seem unreasonable for any other venture.

Remarrying people are not insane. Neither are they foolish. Stories gleaned from divorced and remarried people over more than two decades of counseling lead me to one conclusion. No matter how previously married people interpret their own divorces and marital histories, those trying again want what the first-married want. They want a family life and companionship. But more than the first-married, these couples also thirst for an added incarnation of grace that will restore faith in a relational process that has eluded them or failed them.

First-married couples often begin life together blind to their own individual dispositions, unaware of propensities toward ill-advised marital choices and family processes that are not highly conducive to relational success. They reasonably expect to grow into marital fulfillment in spite of, or because of, these complicating factors. Stress in first marriages is considered normal and a part of relational growth. Family, church, and community support systems coalesce to help these couples in their difficulties. On the other hand, remarrying couples are likely to see themselves (and be seen by their social support systems) as repeat offenders of relational misjudgment. Their motives are more likely to be maligned by their own self-assessment and by their family and friends. When normal relationship stresses appear, the remarried are more likely to interpret these negatively. Social

⁷Popenoe, "The Evolution of Marriage," 7.

support systems will back away and claim impotence in the face of stepfamily complexity. This confirms for the remarried that family life and companionship are out of reach for them.

Remarrying couples are not insane. They are not foolish. They do, however, enter a relational wilderness armed only with a rudimentary map marked with preliminary, vague, and uncertain landmarks. Compasses useful on other journeys are quickly found to be misleading, and there is little chance for a sustained rescue attempt should the expedition break down. Remarrying couples, at one level or another, balance personal and relational despair with a determined hope that enough grace is available to restore part of their battered dream and to sustain them through sometimes hostile territory. Pastoral care is about helping divorced and remarried families find an empowered connection with the gospel and the body of Christ that will orient them toward grace and hope in the wilderness of stepfamily living.

Stepfamilies and Congregational Care

Divorced and remarried families are fast becoming a new norm for family life. The pictures painted by statistics and individual stepfamily stories are clear. Those who live in stepfamilies need spiritual nurture and effective pastoral care. Yet resources for care of stepfamilies are absent or painfully inadequate. At the dawn of the new millennium, a review of the religious literature shows the following:

- There is no substantial writing or research of any kind in journals or pastoral care books about critically evaluated pastoral care for stepfamilies.
- Apart from a recent introductory chapter in a broader volume, no substantial journal articles or books on pastoral care and counseling treat remarried couples as a theologically legitimate, unique, or different population.
- There seems to be no attempt in the literature to explore any theology—pastoral, biblical, or otherwise—of stepfamily or remarriage.
- There is no research or speculation on religious development in stepfamilies.

At best, pastoral care of stepfamilies is guided by suggestions and a few preliminary models from behavioral sciences. Many of these are drawn from extrapolations about stepfamilies based on nuclear family processes. It is important that pastoral care providers understand that such models begin in what stepfamilies must not be and cannot be. They must not be an attempt to replicate a nuclear family, and they cannot be traditional. Other

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models are ambitious conceptual models describing what stepfamilies ought to be. Most of these normalize the pain of stepfamily process and try to offer some hope that problems might hurt a little less if family roles can change and stepfamily shame can be eliminated. These models, most of which are based on clinical symptoms and analysis of social problems, are an inadequate foundation for either pastoral care or a positive theological vision for stepfamily life.

Today's stepfamilies are rooted in divorce. Adults and children who live through divorce speak in a variety of languages about feeling ripped in half. In words, symptoms, and actions, they describe a systemic wound that begins in the depths of a punctured spirit and reaches outward through broken hope, relational shame, and institutional abandonment. When "family" as a central creative and redemptive metaphor to organize life is lost, a sense of futurelessness, spiritual poverty, and brokenness soon follows. This is the soil into which new stepfamilies are planted. Social and behavioral sciences can offer some conceptual distance by normalizing this pain and by reorganizing stigma attached to the experience. But there is no true redemptive vision when care is limited to calling loss gain and suggesting role adjustments. This cannot provide a redemptive vision or a path out of the tangled bondage of relational, emotional, and spiritual failure that is all too familiar to too many stepfamilies.

Divorced and remarried families begin in loss. The daily by-product of stepfamily living is recycled chronic loss. These griefs are inescapable and have deeply spiritual roots. Recovery rests in helping stepfamilies reorder life in redemptive and sustaining ways. This is a spiritual task that rightly belongs to theology and the community of faith. It is the community of faith that learns to speak of God who "acts persuasively upon the wreckage [of life] to bring from it whatever good is possible,"⁸ and sees this persuasion as infinitely persistent and the greatest of all powers. Hope is more than normalization or reducing stigma. It is resurrection. It is recovery of a future. A pastoral theology well grounded in hope and resurrection must undergird any pastoral care for stepfamilies. By beginning here, the church can connect the pain and despair of stepfamily stories and their statistical futures with the embodied hope of the gospel narrative expressed in a community of faith.

⁸John Cobb and David Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 118.