



Peacemaking in the Family

“I therefore ... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

This passage from the Letter to the Ephesians in the Christian scriptures speaks to all of us. While often applied to communal life in the church, it has profound significance for our communal life in families.

There are so many ways in which the burdens of contemporary life affect us, and couple and family therapists work with our clients to help facilitate healing and reconciliation, enabling them to become peacemakers in their own families.

The following are a few of the challenges that can result in relationship conflicts:

- Stress and anxiety;
- Time (mis-)management;
- Illness (physical and emotional);
- Addictions;
- Financial pressures;
- Sexual affairs or abuse;
- Parenting differences;
- Grandparent and extended family problems (including issues of ageing);
- Values differences;
- Mismanagement of anger.

Most conflicts in the family are rooted in communication breakdowns. In today's economically stressful time, financial stress and poor money management can become major factors. This is doubly compounded if a family is suffering from work layoffs and unemployment.

We frequently hear concerns about differing parenting styles and values, and also grandparenting issues, as being triggers for communication breakdown. But one of the most serious factors is the mismanagement of anger: if physical, verbal, or emotional abuse prevails in a family, then communication is severely damaged.

Bullying has no place in a family setting, just as it has no place in the school or workplace. Likewise, if either withholding (refusing to be honest) or stonewalling (refusing to negotiate) are used as methods of non-communication, then communication is broken or irreparably blocked.

Such roots of conflict can result in relationships fraught with tension, where humility and gentleness, patience and forbearance are not practiced, and love is wounded.

Peacemaking, in practical terms, means that we need first a willingness to (re)connect, and a combination of patience, an openness to listening, and a heart of compassion for the other member(s) of the family. It also requires that we be able to express clearly our own needs and to be open to negotiate and compromise in finding solutions to problems. Peacemaking is not avoidance of conflict, it is engaging with conflict in order to seek understanding and just relations.

There is a sense of the sacred that is present in moments of people connecting with one another, in seeking healing and forgiveness and peace.

To be able to reconcile ourselves to someone with whom we've become estranged due to the stressors and challenges that pervade family lives, we need to seek first within ourselves for the grace:

- To manifest a gentle spirit;
- To be focused and to have the will to make peace;
- To speak truthfully in love;
- To listen deeply to the other (i.e, to hear well);
- To be open to forgiveness.

The experience of couple and family therapy can be a safe place to begin the process of genuinely hearing one another, where “neutral territory” allows the therapist to gently facilitate each person to open up to the other.

Where conflicts have been longstanding, often the process of healing takes longer. If there has been violence or abuse, then it may not be safe for people to be together initially, and the therapist may see members separately and move very gradually to a place of face to face sessions. But some relationships may be too damaged and the situation is not salvageable; hence for example, couples may find a peacemaking process through mediation to end the legal marriage in the kindest way possible, and if there are children, to negotiate a creative parenting plan. (IFL works with a legal mediator to facilitate such agreements).

Family therapists work with a wide variety of relationships: grandparents raising grandchildren, common law partners, premarital counselling, couples struggling with infertility, marriages seeking to recover from affairs, families with an addicted child or parent or spouse, couples facing retirement or loss of employment — just to name a few.

In all these instances, there is a need to seek to maintain the peace of the relationship. Not a false peace based on avoidance or denial, but the true peace that comes from facing reality together honestly and openly and from working together towards genuine solutions and recovery and healing.

For all of us at IFL, it is a privilege to enter into the lives of our clients and to walk together with them in a path of peacemaking.

Adapted from the International Anglican Family Network, Easter 2009

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For Further Reading:

Davis, Laura. *I Thought We'd Never Speak Again: The Road from Estrangement to Reconciliation*. HarperCollins, 2002.

Augsburger, David W. *Caring Enough to Confront*. 3rd Edition. Regal, 2009.

Fisher, R., Ury, W., and Patten, B. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. 2nd Edition. Penguin, 1991.



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