



Report on the Survey of Family Development Concerns of Pastors: *Task Force on the Family, NAE*¹

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In 1984, the Task Force conducted a survey of pastors within representative churches of the NAE affiliated denominations and affiliations. The pastors and other church staff persons who were surveyed constitute a cross section in terms of church size, pastoral tenure, type of community and national region. The questions were designed to identify the particular problems of family development and family need being encountered within the representative churches.

The NAE Task Force on the Family has concentrated attention on the resources available to pastors as they attempt to serve family development needs in local congregations.² The nationwide problem of family instability places the local pastor in a particularly difficult position. Pastors are called upon for all sorts of assistance in cases of family stress, but few pastors have been specifically prepared for the situations in which they now find themselves.

Within the past decade a vast array of new family development resources has become available. The NAE Task Force on the Family sees the current problem more as a matter of awareness and access than of need for expanding the resources.

Many highly competent counselors and educators now provide well-organized therapy and prevention seminars and workshops focused on family concerns. Significant books and packaged audiovisual materials have been published. The Task Force is now trying to determine more effective ways to get these materials and resources into the purview of the local churches. Strengthening the pastors is basic in this process.

The study of pastors' needs and interests in family development had its roots in the decision of the Task Force on the Family to concentrate its efforts on the pastor of the local church. The decision was based on the opinion that family concerns in the church require of the pastor an informed and skilled capacity. It is the pastor who must assist the people of God in their quest for strong and godly families.

Since its origin in 1982, the Task Force on the Family has been working to increase the attention that NAE and the churches affiliated with NAE give to the matter of family development. Among other things, the Task Force has compiled and published lists of resource materials of value to pastors. In order to relate its efforts to the actual situations in which pastors encounter family development problems, a survey was planned and carried out. The major purpose of the survey was to identify the topics and situations of major concern to pastors in the various denominations affiliated with NAE.

The Sample

The survey instrument was developed and tested at Michigan State University during the Spring of 1984. The plan called for the Executive Office of the NAE to manage the data gathering, in co-operation with the denominational offices.

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² See companion paper in Document Archives: Research on Religion and Family, 1985

Thus the very procedure adopted for the data gathering involved several logistical problems which weakened the study. Since there is no procedure available for direct access to pastors, it was decided to go through the intermediacy of denominational offices. The inexact control of both the selection of the sample and the potentially biased handling of the communications resulted in the following constraints on generalizability.

1. The selection of subjects would be expected to be biased in the favor of those pastors who are better known and thought to be good examples as seen by the denominational executives charged with distributing the survey forms and gathering them back again for mailing to the NAE office. It is not unreasonable to think that even among honest people, a certain amount of bias would enter into so “loose” a procedure—an executive would surely want his denomination to “look good”.
2. Pastors who are more concerned about the matter of family development can be assumed to be more likely to respond to the survey than those who are less concerned.
3. The proportional representation of the various denominations must be assumed to be inconsistent with the proportions of the pastors within NAE as a whole. The fact that the responses as requested and returned were not logged leaves only the identification of the forms as received in batches from the denominational offices as the basis of determining their sources. From these identifications and from the demographic data contained in the responses themselves, we get a picture of the sample as being not proportionally representative of the denominational distribution of pastors within NAE as a whole, but in virtually every other respect the sample seems typical—size of church membership and attendance, size of community, and age.

The researchers deliberately calculated and accepted the risks associated with this sort of “beyond control” selection of the sample. It has been assumed, with responsible precedent, that such biases, when in the hands of those who most need to be influenced by the findings, work to reduce the tendency to explain away the findings on the grounds that the sample had been drawn with an “alien” bias.

In other words, considering the findings in retrospect, one might ask: If it’s this bad with a sample biased in the direction of the known, the handy, the interested, and the co-operative, what would a random sample or the whole population be like?

Findings

In response to an open-ended item about needed resources, the pastors surveyed listed two topics well above all others: *Communication Skills* and *Financial Affairs*. The next most frequent cluster of matters being encountered in the course of pastoral ministry with which the pastors indicated needing help were the following:

- Parent-adolescent relationships
- Child-rearing
- Marital and premarital counseling
- Alcoholism and drug abuse.

This list of concerns of pastors of evangelical churches is very similar to lists derived from non-Christian sources. The evidence suggests that the social and personal problems that Christians are encountering and presenting emerge largely from failure to cope with the contemporary culture in uniquely Christian ways.

This generalization was also supported by the finding that in the view of most pastors surveyed *problems of today’s Christian families, compared with those of non-Christian families, are more similar than different.*

In general, *problems of today's Christian families, compared with those a generation ago, are more different than similar*, according to the respondents. Surprisingly, and not altogether consistent with this judgment, a majority indicated that the *problems of today's Christian families, "compared with those I was trained to deal with" are more similar than different*. The majority of pastors accept the family problems encountered in their ministry as *similar to concerns they encounter in their own families*.

An extensive cross-tabulation of each demographic characteristic against each of the family-needs-and-concerns items revealed relatively few significant findings. In other words, there are relatively few systematic subdivisions of the respondents that can account for differences among their responses. Central tendencies were consistent and in common though degrees of variability were occasionally noted. Among the few demographic differentiations were the following:

1. The factor of community size played a part in the responses to the item *Problems of today's Christian families, compared with those I was trained to deal with are . . .* From those in metropolitan churches the responses were significantly different, in that the differences between real problems encountered and those dealt with in the preparation for ministry were more commonly seen as different.
2. In general, the smaller the community the more inclined the pastor is to indicate that *problems of mixed marriages (Christian married to non-Christian) compared with those of the all-Christian family are very different*.
3. Younger pastors are significantly more likely than older pastors to indicate little or no difference between the family problems they are confronting and those for which their training prepared them.
4. The larger the church the greater the incidence of family fidelity problems. This correlation is weak (+.20134) but is significant (.0001 level). Closely related is another weak but significant correlation between church size and frequency of reporting: *Family breakdown is becoming a more common problem in my congregation*. (+.16905; significance = .001).
5. Pastors in larger churches are more likely than those in small churches to refer family problems to other staff members or to outside specialists. Respectively, the correlations and significance statistics were +.39432 (.00001) and +.22507 (.00001).
6. The larger the church, the greater the tendency of couples, men, and women to inform the pastor and seek counsel on their family problems. The correlations, respectively, and significance levels are as follows: +.3193 (.0001), +.21182 (.0001), and +.16488 (.001).

Important absence of differences was noted among certain factors for which differences might be logically predicted:

1. Contrasts between opinions of pastors who serve alone and those who serve with support staff were discovered on no items.
2. Suburban, small city, small town and rural pastors were more similar in their responses than different. Metropolitan pastors (500,000+) were significantly different on many items.
3. Age of the pastor seems to be less significant as a differential factor than does recency of education and experience with family development workshops.

NOTE: The nature of the sample precluded differentiations of the following factors because of insufficient cases-per-cell: *Role* (other than differentiation of pastors with no staff and pastors with a staff); *Ages of Children*; and *Marital Status*.

Conclusions

A view emerged of pastors as lonely persons in matters of competence and security in assisting family development in their congregations. Almost half of those surveyed have never or only once attended any sort of workshop or program of assistance related to their skills in dealing with family

matters. Half of the respondents indicate never having turned to another pastor for help with family concerns in their congregations. Almost half say that they have never helped another pastor in such matters. At the same time a strong evidence emerged in the “comments” sections of the questionnaire concerning distrust of counselors outside the church. One must wonder to whom the majority of these pastors can turn for professional assistance in matters of family development and need for therapeutic assistance.

In the face of this essentially lonely stance, *women* bring far more requests for help to the pastor than do *men*. *Couples* seek the pastor’s help more commonly than do men, but less than do women.

Two open-ended response items were designed to elicit data about the topics of greatest interest to pastors who are seeking further information or assistance. The first of these items inquired about help sought in workshops on family development which the respondent might have attended.

The second item asked for suggestions about topics which should be treated in a book on family concerns which might be forthcoming. No significant difference was found between the responses to these two items, so the list of cited topics was combined and quantitatively noted in the following list.

The leading problems brought to pastors, in decreasing order of frequency are the following:

- 55 communication skills
- 50 finance
- 30 divorce and remarriage
- 29 adolescent problems (peer pressure, rebellion)
- 26 parent-child relationships
- 26 marital/premarital counseling
- 24 alcoholism and drug abuse
- 19 sex
- 19 discipline
- 18 stress
- 18 husband-wife roles, relationships, spiritual matters
- 16 family worship
- 14 conflict resolution
- 14 unsaved spouse
- 14 marital/premarital faithfulness
- 13 family priorities
- 11 forgiveness
- 9 spiritual maturity
- 8 abortion
- 8 child abuse
- 7 depression
- 7 mixed marriages
- 6 learning to sense family problems
- 5 single parents
- 5 life-cycle adjustments
- 4 family counseling
- 2 suicide

Substantially less frequently reported—and thus one of the few contrasts with data on the same issues derived from surveys in the general American society—are *fidelity problems*.

Nevertheless, 58% of the pastors surveyed indicate that *“family breakdown is becoming a more common problem in my congregation”*.

A curious finding emerged from the analysis of patterns of responses differentiated by denominations. In certain denominations, the respondents predominately identified family problems in Christian families as essentially *similar* to those of non-Christian families:

- Conservative Baptist
- Christian and Missionary Alliance
- Church of God
- Mennonites
- Missionary Church
- Evangelical Free Church
- Nazarene
- Presbyterian

In other denominations, the respondents predominantly identified family problems in Christian families as essentially *different* from those of non-Christian families:

- Assembly of God
- Methodist

Though they may appear to be lonely, the pastors surveyed emerge as a rather secure and even self-confident set of human beings. Most feel that their knowledge of available resources for helping families is adequate to strong. Overwhelmingly, they describe themselves as able to help their own families. (One might wonder if the evidences of self-sufficiency are a manifestation of strong individualism.) Similarly, the pastors judge their own level of competence to help other people with family concerns as being relatively high.

In sum, the Task Force survey revealed a high level of awareness of family-related problems and issues in the evangelical churches, a concern on the part of pastors for effective coping and appropriate assistance. At the same time, the observer can see highly individualistic pastors as lonely helpers with extraordinary confidence in their own ability to provide appropriate assistance within the circle of their own families and congregations.

The question now confronting the Task Force: *Does this pastor really want to be helped?*