
Thoughts on family ethics

by Ruth Krall

Personal prologue

In preparing for this article, I realized that I have multiple windows into Mennonite family life. Although I am a single adult woman without children, my personal experience of family life has two dimensions. First, I am a member of the family into which I was born. In that family I experienced parental relationships, sibling relationships, and a deep embeddedness within a stable network of extended family relationships. In that family I developed both a personal and a familial identity. It was within my extended birth-family that I developed awareness of my religious and ethnic identity as Mennonite.

As a North American woman, singleness was a feasible option for my life as I left college. Decisions about singleness yielded the realization that I would never recreate the secure stability of life patterns represented by my parental home. Instead, over the past twenty-five years, I have carefully constructed an alternative family of close friends. This friend-family is multigenerational, multiethnic, and includes both men and women. It includes single mothers, married couples, divorced or widowed individuals, people who have made personal commitments to live together as a family, and other single people without children. Within this alternative friend-family I most closely replicate the family life of married couples. Within the friend-family I celebrate birthdays, holidays, informal gatherings, and transitions of life. Within this friend-family I mourn the deaths and losses of adult life. Within this group of friends I make ongoing decisions about my life and also help others to make their own decisions.

These initial windows into Mennonite family life remain important to my life. In my birth-family I am old enough to find pleasure in new generations being born. In my friend-family I am included as friends make personal decisions in all arenas of their adult life. I am included in discussions about the daily parenting of children as well as in discussions about the care of aging parents. Careers, health, money, recreation: all of these become topics of mutual concern.

As a single person I am aware that the daily textures of my life differ from most of my friends and acquaintances. Yet I also know I am not an "only." At any given time in the United States, one-third of all adults over age 18 are single. My mother, for example, who was married for nearly thirty-five years and raised three children, has had more years of single life than I. After my father's death she needed to create a new family for herself, a network of relatives and friends.

Other windows than personal experience exist to create awareness of Mennonite family life. As a psychiatric-mental health nurse specialist, I worked in two

distinctly different Mennonite mental health hospitals—the first in an area settled predominantly by the Mennonite Church, the second in an area where Mennonite Brethren and General Conference Mennonites were more typical.

In more recent years, classroom and counseling contacts with college students at Goshen College have provided the opportunity to listen to young Mennonites. Many of these students are attempting to sort out identity issues for themselves. Many are actively engaged in questions of “faith and people.” They want to know who they are. They also want to know what a community of faith means for their own lives and their decisions.

It is from this multishaped vantage point that I write of family ethics in the Mennonite church. I am not summarizing a research study, nor am I a certified expert in family relations. Rather, I am an observer of my own life and the life of families within the North American Mennonite church.

Concerns

A young woman sits opposite me. She says, “The lecture yesterday about divorce statistics in the United States made me furious. My parents were such good Mennonites. Yet last month they told me they have separated and plan to get a divorce. What about all that religious teaching about marriage as a lifelong commitment in good and bad times?”

This student is no longer alone in her pain, anger, and questioning. The impact of divorce in the Mennonite church continues to grow. There are fewer and fewer congregations that have never had a divorce decision made by a member couple. The Church Member Profile II (1989) of five denominations in the United States and Canada (Mennonite Church, General Conference Mennonite Church, Mennonite Brethren Church, Brethren in Christ Church, and Evangelical Mennonite Church) reveals that divorce has quadrupled since the 1972 survey. In 1972, 1 percent of the original survey’s respondents reported divorce. By 1989, 4.2 percent did so. Twice as many divorces are found among Mennonites in urban areas as among those in rural areas. Increased education, increasing assimilation to the values of the dominant culture, and rising expectations for marital happiness may all be factors in these statistics. (Personal conversation, J. Howard Kauffman, February 1990)

A young man sits in my office and cries. He says, “My dad is gay. Ever since I’ve been six or seven years old, I have felt something was different in my family. Now my mom tells me that Dad has a male lover. She doesn’t want a divorce and says he doesn’t want one either. I really love both my parents. How could he do this to her? How could he do this to me? Mom told me that the church was going to intervene. But what

good will that do? They will just make a bad situation worse. They can't make my dad love my mom again. They can't make him "not gay."

In the 1989 Church Member Profile, more than 96 percent of respondents reported a heterosexual orientation while less than 4 percent reported a bisexual or homosexual orientation. Mennonites are not in agreement about the acceptability of a homosexual lifestyle or upon the acceptability of a homosexual orientation. Neither official church structures nor individual church members all agree on the meaning of homosexuality in the lives of Mennonite individuals. The presence of a gay caucus in the Mennonite church signals most clearly this difference of opinion. When gay men and lesbian women met daily at a church conference (Normal, Illinois, 1989) in a public prayer and praise meeting, they challenged the opinion of official structures and the majority of church members as well. The church press in both countries reports strongly held but widely divergent views on this matter. Yet individuals and families within the church struggle to understand themselves and those they love. Many attempt to maintain strong ties with the church. In a climate of dialogue where opinion is strongly polarized, they often struggle in secret and in isolation.

A young woman sits in my living room and comments, "I had an abortion a year ago. I was raped by my date after our graduation party. I never have told anyone about the rape. And I never told anyone about the abortion until it was over. I always thought abortion was sinful until I was pregnant after that rape. All I could do then was to think about suicide or abortion. I decided I wanted to live. That meant I had to have an abortion. I don't know any other Mennonite woman who has had an abortion. I need to talk with someone who understands what I've been through. Do you know any Mennonite woman who would be willing to talk with me about her experience with abortion?"

Abortion is another one of the family life issues about which church members and church structures disagree. Church publications editorialize that abortion is not acceptable to Mennonites. The anti-choice movement among Mennonites gets strong support in the Mennonite press. (See *Gospel Herald*, Editorial, February 21, 1989.) Many Mennonite lay people feel that abortion is always wrong. Yet some Mennonite women seek abortions, and other Mennonite women and men support the pro-choice movement. Women who are pregnant and who need to make decisions about pregnancy continuation or termination often feel they must make these decisions alone. They also feel as if they must live in silence with their decision.

A married friend calls on the phone and says, "I need to talk. You know we have been trying to get pregnant for the past five years. Nothing has worked. I really want a baby of our own and so does he. Now the doctor tells me we could try a new fertility drug. But it is going to be very

expensive, and we might end up having several babies. I can't handle the idea of giving birth to several babies, some of whom may not be able to live outside the womb. And I'm not sure I think it is right to spend this much money to try to get a baby and perhaps still not get pregnant.

The presence of reproductive technologies in North America means that individuals and couples can make decisions about pregnancy that were not possible a decade ago. In addition to the technologies that are used to facilitate conception, others have been developed to diagnose problems. According to a special issue of *Newsweek* (Winter/Spring 1990), physicians are already able to identify some 250 genetic defects, "not only in the blood of a potential parent but in the tissue of a developing fetus. The result is that, for the first time in history, people are deciding, rather than wondering, what kind of children they will bear" (p. 94). Looking to the future, it is anticipated that science will eventually be able to "[discern defects] five days after fertilization, before the embryo even implants in the uterine wall" (p. 95).

The technological capacity to identify fetal gender is now in place, permitting individuals or couples to select the sex of a baby. *Newsweek* reports that sex selectivity has begun to be practiced in the United States. In 1973, only 1 percent of American geneticists considered it morally acceptable to abort fetuses of an undesired gender. By 1989, nearly 20 percent approved in any situation and, in a 1985 survey, 62 percent said "they would screen fetuses for a couple who had four healthy daughters and wanted a son" (p. 100).

Over coffee a good friend breaks down in sobs. She says, "My granddaughter has just accused her father of sexually molesting her when she was an adolescent. I am so upset I don't know what to do or think. One moment I want to tell her she is lying. The next, I want to comfort her. I can't believe my son did something like that. But I can't believe she is lying either. What are we to do? What am I to do? I just can't make any sense out of it all."

Incest, sexual molestation, and rape are present in Mennonite families in North America and Canada. In addition, spouse abuse is also present. In the 1989 Church Member Profile, 10 percent of respondents report physical abuse as children; 6 percent report sexual abuse as children; nearly 4 percent report forced intercourse before marriage; and almost 4 percent report spouse abuse. The pain and turmoil caused by these violations of the human body and spirit are gradually being made known among us. Articles in the church press, for example, the September 4, 1989, edition of the *Mennonite Reporter*—"My Crucified Childhood: The Horrors of a Christian Upbringing"—remind us that the pain and psychological damage of child abuse, spouse abuse, and sexual violence are not readily healed for victims of such violence and abuse. In addition, family mem-

bers and friends are also wounded by the presence of victimization in any given set of human family relationships.

A letter arrives from a college classmate. She writes, "This has been a very hard year for us. Our marriage has not been very satisfying to either of us for the past five years. But we have both been working at it ... or so I thought. Now I find out he has been having a fairly open affair with his secretary. Many of his friends knew but never told me. I found a note to him from her in the laundry and asked him about it. That's how I found out. He promises me the affair is finished. But I am having great difficulty believing him. He betrayed our marriage vows. Why should I trust him at all? I am depressed and hurt by all of this. Maybe I would feel better if I also had an affair and paid him back in kind. However, I probably would only feel worse. I don't know what I am going to do about all of this. So far, I haven't told the children and hope we never will need to do so.

Ethical concerns

In each of the vignettes above, individuals are struggling with family life issues. Real life relationships have created moments of pain, anger, hurt, or struggle. Each individual within these vignettes represents a relationship that has an ethical dilemma present within its core.

What happens to children when parents divorce? Divorce does not only reflect a couple's wishes for happiness. It also reflects their pessimism about being able to be happy together. Divorce affects both individuals in a couple. It also affects their children. In addition, it affects grandparents and the extended family. Divorce is not a private decision. It is profoundly familial.

What happens to families and individuals within families when one member recognizes that he or she is a homosexual? When any issue is politicized in the way that homosexuality has been politicized among Mennonites, polarization occurs. The impact of that polarization may have more effects on the individual than does the initial awareness of her or his difference from the majority.

Abortion, likewise, is a decision that has been politicized and polarized in our thinking as a people. For many church members, abortion is always wrong. For others it is a difficult but necessary choice. As with other debated issues in church life, the impact of strong pro-choice and anti-choice positions has created a situation wherein a woman's pain and suffering remain hidden.

Decisions about reproductive technology involve decisions about the creation of life and the destruction of life. In addition, the presence of these technologies also raises stewardship issues among us. How will a family, committed to a

communal faith in the people of God, make decisions about spending money for reproductive assistance?

Having begun to recognize the sexual violence among Mennonites, we are now faced with the need to make decisions about it. In what ways do we need to work with victims of such violence, and in what ways do we need to work with the victimizers? What is the essential message of repentance that is needed? Is there a message of forgiveness and reconciliation that will not further betray the victim?

Finally, when sexual betrayal is discovered within a marital relationship, what is needed by all individuals affected by the betrayal? How is healing brought about for the couple, for the third person, or for any children involved? What is the message of repentance and reconciliation? In what way can the church, as the communal people of God, represent the mercy of God as people attempt to reestablish their lives?

As we enter this new decade on the edge of a new millennium, challenges to family ethics will continue to multiply. The presence of technology will continue to expand possibilities for choice. Specific texts of Scripture or tradition may no longer appear able to guide us. Genetic engineering, for example, was not a possibility in the biblical era. Today we are making genetic decisions about childbirth and abortion. Many of these decisions are made privately and without consultation within the church. However, if we claim to be a communal people of God, we are bound together by fibers of accountability. What is the nature of that accountability as we face issues of reproduction?

One of the unresolved issues of North American Mennonite life is how we will define accountability to God and people. When specific issues divide us—for example, homosexuality or abortion—how will we begin to discern God's will? Once discernment has occurred, how will we enforce the belief of the majority group? How will we respect the consciences of those who represent minority opinions? As we North American Mennonites are once more engaged in active evangelism within our own North American cultures, life-realities similar to those of the vignettes above will continue to emerge with their implicit demands for understanding and action. On what basis will we begin to assist individuals and families to cope with these life-realities? What spiritual growth is called for in a time of pluralism of choice?

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Note

The case vignettes in this article have been created by the author and do not represent any actual individuals or situations.