



SALEM Digest

Autumn 2000 • News of interest to friends of Salem Christian Mental Health Association

THE CHALLENGE OF BEING A BLENDED FAMILY

Judy Cook

In spite of people's best intentions, hopes, and expectations, not every marriage will last until "death do us part." Conversely, some marriages will end well before the "empty nest" stage, because of the untimely death of one of the spouses. Whether the end of a marriage is due to divorce or death, there is often a great desire felt by the person experiencing the loss of a marriage to find a new partner, and to create once again the type of nuclear family (including a loving mother and father, and contented children) which existed or was hoped for in the past.

Unfortunately, the break-up of second marriages is even more prevalent than of first marriages. This is not surprising, since the blending of two existing families brings many more challenges than the blending of two people who then slowly begin to build a family, one child (usually) at a time.

The biggest challenge begins at the break-up of the first family. Through divorce or death the family configuration has become profoundly different for each family member. Every family member feels the loss in a different way, but especially the children will continue to carry the break-up scars for a long time. Through the confusion and pain of their changed world will run the refrains: "Is this my fault" (feelings of guilt) and "will my other parent also leave or die?" (Feelings of fear.) Particularly children of divorce will resist incorporating a new stepfather or mother because

of such feelings of fear and guilt. After all, maybe this new parent will leave too, or, if he/she would only disappear, my real father/mother could come home again. Children continue to hope for such a reunion between their birth parents well after their parents have remarried.

When parents remarry, new painful feelings have to be managed. Children may feel anger at having to share belongings with new siblings. They may feel jealousy at having to share mom or



dad's love with people not of their choosing. They may experience confusion at the expectations placed on them to "be family" with a new parent and siblings who do not feel even as close to them as their friends.

Although couples who find each other after experiencing the divorce or death of a spouse can and do build a strong new relationship, they often undermine the difficulties which will result when two existing families are blended. Expectations are sometimes unrealistic. The couple may believe that the closeness and love they experience for each other will automatically translate into closeness for the rest of the family. Knowing what has to be resolved before the new marriage takes place, and knowing what tasks may lie ahead after remarriage, may go a long way toward avoiding chaos or yet another break-up for all family members involved.

The first task to be worked at by a couple is to clearly define and understand what the step-parent role will be. It is a mistake for a step-parent to expect instant obedience from stepchildren once the new family is formed. It is imperative to realize that a relationship of trust with a child precedes any authority a new parent can have to influence the child's behaviour. And usually such a relationship will have to be created anew once the step-parent becomes a permanent part of the family after marriage. Couples should begin by discussing what kind of bond they can realistically develop with stepchildren. The older the child, the less likely a parent-child relationship can be forged. Perhaps a friendship bond

continued on page 2

Executive Corner

Rev. Al Dreise

Salem's Partnership Program Salem is involved in some exciting partnerships in service to fulfil its mandate: *to provide and support models of mental health care services.* Partnerships have evolved and are being maintained with community groups, churches, and other organizations in which Salem's resources and the resources of the Christian community are brought together in order to prevent and alleviate mental and emotional distress.

Since 1990 Salem has been involved in partnership arrangement with eleven mental health projects which have included counselling services, addiction recovery, and support services.

We are currently most actively involved with *Homestead Residential Services, Family Outreach, Peel Halton District Christian Counselling,* and the *Pastoral Care Association* in the Durham Region.

An emerging partnership with churches in the Barrie area to provide a counselling service is in its embryonic stage.

Homestead is in the process of expanding its services to provide support and care for persons and families facing a major psychiatric illness.

We are in discussion with two other potential partnership arrangements with a view to developing

continued on page 4



Rev. Al Dreise

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Blended Family

(continued from page 1)

is more realistic. A good way for a step-parent to build a relationship with stepchildren is to engage them in activities they enjoy. For some children this might be active, outdoor play, for others board or card games. This task of creating a relationship can gradually be expanded to include more parental tasks such as helping with homework, or driving children to, and keeping track of, extracurricular activities.

Children have to feel that in accepting a new parent they are not being asked to give up the birth-parent. One of the most difficult challenges a blended family faces is incorporating an absent father and mother successfully in the lives of their children. Children must be allowed to love both their birth-parents, even if the absent parent is seen as less than ideal. An absent parent should be referred to respectfully and neutrally, even if you feel his/her behaviour is immature, manipulative, and selfish, and his or her rules are inappropriate.

When nine-year-old Natalie came home from weekends with her father, her mother would quiz her on where they had gone, what she had eaten, what time she went to bed, etc. If they had gone to the

racetrack, eaten junk-food, and Natalie went to bed late, her mother would express her disapproval and frustration with her ex-husband. Natalie learned to say as little as possible about her interaction with her father, and her mother became concerned about her daughter's withdrawal and the fact she had trouble sleeping both before and after the visits. She would wake up with nightmares, and also complained of stomach cramps. Her mother had to learn that it was not the father who was contributing to Natalie's difficulties—after all, children can adapt successfully to a wide range of parenting styles—but that she had to stop berating him to her daughter. Children who hear their absent parent criticized will also feel attacked. Internalized criticism and attack will eventually lead to rebellious and destructive behaviour.

It is not difficult to understand that the task a couple faces when trying to blend two families is not first of all adjusting to becoming a new couple, but more importantly, defining the parenting roles and determining how the new parent-child relationship can best be developed. If the challenge of creating a good relationship and a working parenting style by the new parent towards his or her stepchildren is ignored or minimized, the creation of a



harmonious blended family will at best take much longer than it should and be fraught with conflict and anger. At worst it will never happen, leaving the family in pain, or leading to another separation by the couple. To blend two existing families can be a rewarding and enriching experience for all involved. If a couple takes on this challenge with their eyes wide open, if they understand and

have compassion for their children's needs, and if they can resist exercising authority in favour of creating a relationship, then, with God's help, the family graft can take root, and real growth can happen. The result may not function the same as the original nuclear families, but may be its own satisfying blend of family relationships, well worth creating and developing.

WHY SUPPORT GROUPS?

June Zwier

Support Groups seem to be popping up all over the place and for many different reasons and situations. There are groups for individuals who are experiencing illnesses such as cancer, depression or migraines.

There are groups for life's transitions such as becoming parents or becoming empty nesters; groups for emotional problems (*Emotions Anonymous*); and also caregiver groups for those living with someone who has difficulties such as Alzheimer's. Why have these groups become so popular and so prominent?

Actually the first support group, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, was formed in 1935. Since then the movement to form support groups has grown to enormous proportions. The common denominator in all these situations is suffering, which is just what support groups seek to reduce or alleviate.

The goal of support groups is to provide a means of supporting one another through the recovery or "healing process" and to ensure that we are not alone or all by ourselves in the situation. C.S. Lewis said, "Friendship is born at that

moment when one person says to another, 'What! You too? I thought I was the only one'."

What better place than the church for support groups to be developed and to reach out to the suffering! Are we not the body of Christ in which if one part suffers every part suffers with it?

Many churches are taking up the challenge to bear one another's burdens by considering support groups for the various needs of their immediate congregation and their community.

Support groups are needed also for the many caregivers and volunteers working with those in difficulty. Ongoing encouragement and a listening ear may be just what are needed for them to keep going.

Since I began working for *Salem Christian Mental Health Association* I am available to help you and your church family look at the possibility of support groups for your congregation. I can help you get started and could continue to be a resource along the way. Give me a call at (905) 623-9901 in Bowmanville.

Salem Needs You!

If you have an interest in serving an organization that ministers to persons and families with emotional or mental health difficulties then we need you.

Salem needs nominees to serve on its board and committees. Please give us a call if you are interested or if you know someone who is.

Mental Illness: A Needs Assessment Survey

Have you or a family member been diagnosed with mental illness?

Has the church been supportive?

We are conducting a Needs Assessment Survey to determine both the areas where supports are needed and those areas where supports are already in place.

We are interested in hearing from people who have been diagnosed with a mental illness, their families, and their church community (pastors, deacons, etc.).

Please call (905) 528-0353 to receive a questionnaire.

All inquiries and responses are confidential.

Salem Fellowship Fund

Some people can't afford to pay fully for their counselling.

Please help by donating to the Salem Fellowship Fund.

TheoPhostic Counselling

Both Betty Brouwer and Judy Cook will be attending an advanced training seminar in Kentucky in October. Training is provided by the originator of TheoPhostic counselling, Dr. Ed Smith.

TP is an inner healing prayer therapy, which works well for difficulties like depression and anxiety, as well as specific trauma based problems such as rape or abuse.

Being able to access God's truth about ourselves and our life can bring tremendous relief of past pain and anguish. If you are struggling with feelings of shame or fear, feelings of being abandoned or not loved, feel powerless or hopeless, we can help. Call Salem for an appointment to receive TheoPhostic therapy.

Executive Corner

(continued from page 2)

Christian counselling and mental health support services.

Churches or community groups wishing to develop a mental health service or ministry in partnership with Salem are encouraged to call Rev. Dreise at (905)528-0353 or June Zwier at (905)623-9901.

Salem's Other Services

Christian Counselling Centre
The Hamilton Counselling Centre is the most comprehensive and ongoing project of *Salem Christian Mental Health Association*. It offers individual (adult, adolescent, and child), couple, and family therapy. Our two therapists are Judy Cook and Betty Brouwer. Rev. Albert Dreise, our Executive Director, also does some pastoral counselling at the Counselling Centre.

The Counselling Centre has a good working relationship with

Christian schools as we offer psycho-educational assessment, consultation, and counselling.

Additional services include art and play therapy.

Durham Region

Last Fall we acquired the services of June Zwier to develop our partnership with the *Pastoral Care Association* in the Cobourg-Whitby (Durham) Region and provide Salem's services east of Toronto. June is available for speaking engagements, providing seminars and workshops, phone consultation, and counselling service. June has a home office in Bowmanville. She can be reached at (905)623-9901. Email: junezwier@sympatico.ca

Seminars and Workshops

Salem's staff is able to provide workshops and seminars on a wide variety of topics and issues, such as depression, mental illness, abuse awareness and prevention,

You are invited to the

SALEM ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP DINNER MEETING

to be held on

Friday, November 3, 2000

at 6:30 pm

Hamilton District Christian High School
92 Glanaster Road, Ancaster

After Dinner Reading

Hugh Cook

\$15.00 per person

\$25.00 per couple

Reservations required by November 1

Ph. (905)528-0353

Fax (905)528-3562

email: aldreise@wchat.on.ca

assertiveness, self-esteem, parenting, marriage, blended family, active listening, brief pastoral counselling, and other mental health issues.

Support Groups

Salem made a commitment to *Christian Rainbows* in 1998 to develop systems of support to persons and families affected by mental illness. In honouring that commitment Salem, together with *Homestead Residential Services*, is actively providing support for persons and families struggling with a major psychiatric illness. Both June Zwier and Al Dreise are in a position to come to your community to provide education, workshops, and assist in setting up a support group to help persons and families cope with long term disabilities due to psychiatric disorders. This fall we are planning to provide such services in six locations in response to requests.