

Ministry faces new priorities

Family decade sees changed church

By Denny and Shari Fischer
Guest contributors

Just the other day, we were looking through our wedding album. It was funny to see how much we've changed, and we joked at how skinny we both were.

We remembered our wedding day fondly. What glorious weather — beautiful blue skies, warm temperature, the leaves on the trees just starting to change color. Shari looked so special and pretty. We remembered how nervous we were, the great expectations we had. Who could miss? We had each other, we were in love and about to embark on our own journey of life together. How we smiled and beamed to finally be Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Fischer.

Now approaching our 25th anniversary of marriage, we can look back and feel the same glow today as we had that early October day. But how society's views on marriage and family life have changed since then.

Being married during the 1960s, we worried that Denny would have to go into the Army. Then came the '70s — the turbulent protests, the Great Society pledge, and the Watergate years.

The '80s began with a declaration by the American bishops that it would be the decade of the family. The 1978 "Bishops' Pastoral Plan of Action for Family Ministry" was a mind's eye view of how support, affirmation and advocacy could build better relationships in the "domestic church," the church of the home, as well as the wider church.

For us, the '80s held some of the biggest changes of our lives. We learned about "family systems" and about "family of origin" as compared to "family of choice." We discovered how deeply our families' characteristics have affected our personalities and attitudes, values and habits — not only as a married couple, but also as a living, spiritual, growing family of interdependent people, each with his or her own special traits.

Looking back at our parents, grandparents and relatives, it's uncanny how much we resemble them. Psychologists say that, by the age of 10, most people have formed all their basic attitudes from those around them. Both of us discovered we had developed coping patterns based on what happened in our "families of origin" and carried those patterns of behavior to our "family of choice," where they either foster or hinder growth.

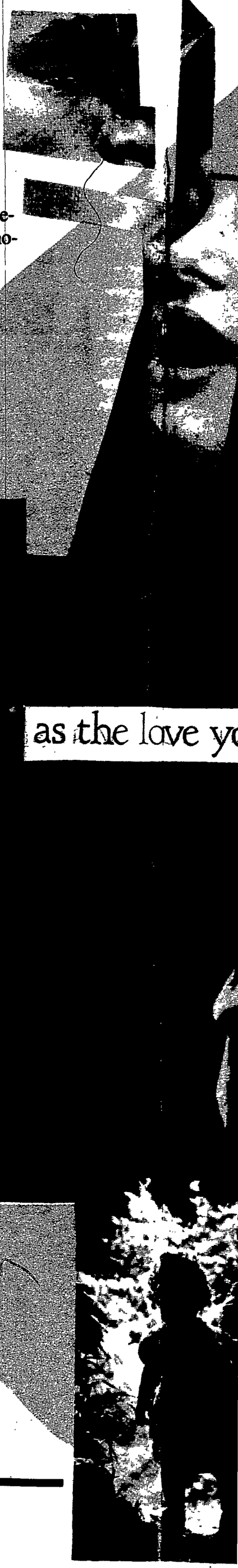
For all our personal growth, we look back on the '80s throughout our diocese and wonder what really happened? Some parishes did surveys, listening sessions, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, social ministries, and programs for parents of school-age children. These were accomplishments.

But we still hear the "cries of the poor" — those who do not fit the traditional roles, who felt left out, unworthy. What of the divorced, remarried, lifelong singles, dual-career couples, step- and blended families, elderly, bereaved parents, widows and widowers, single parents? What of those who face alcohol or drug abuse, physical abuse, poverty, AIDS? What of families that lack a spiritual climate, that struggle just to maintain some cohesiveness from day to day?

As we look at these situations, it would be easy to throw up our hands and say "what good did it do for the bishops to declare a decade of the family?" The '80s were not a time of great behavioral changes — and yet, our awareness was disturbed enough to begin accommodating the process of change in the church.

Roman Catholics of today face debates over Catholic schools, pro-life/pro-choice, artificial birth control, natural family planning, declining numbers among aging clergy, homosexuality, dual career families. We question who should be considered Catholic and who should be asked to leave.

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