

# Catholic Church examines ministries to families

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flect the changes so many Catholic families have encountered over the last few decades, Fischer said. And such changes, in turn, are leading the church to re-examine its ministries to families.

Today, about 70 percent of women with school-age children work outside the home, Shari Fischer noted. As a result, she said, families have had to learn to juggle increasingly busy and complex schedules. And with mothers working outside the home, child-care has become important, she added.

Meanwhile, longer life spans among Americans has led to the term "sandwich generation." After nearly two decades of caring for their children, members of this generation suddenly find themselves caring for elderly parents as well. Moreover, it is no longer uncommon for families to encompass four distinct generations, noted Rick McCord, associate director of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth.

An additional factor affecting the lives of U.S. families is long commutes to work for both parents, McCord said, noting that lengthy rides to and from work reduce the amount of time family members can spend together.

And as people move to different parts of the country to seek work, siblings and different generations may become separated. Some families move repeatedly, making it difficult to establish new roots.

This observation is borne out by Mary Britton, religious-education coordinator at Henrietta's Church of the Good Shepherd, who noted that about 10 percent of Good Shepherd parishioners move each year.

Yet another shift in the pattern of family life is the increasing number of ecumenical marriages. In the past, Catholics tended to marry fellow Catholics. These days, Fischer said, more than half of the marriages involving Catholics are interfaith unions.

The result of these changes — and the accelerated pace at which they occur — is that many families fail to remain intact. Today, nearly 50 percent of marriages — including marriages in the Catholic Church — end in divorce, Fischer reported. Moreover, 50 percent of children of divorced parents have not seen their non-residential parent in more than a year, she said.

Divorce produces increasing num-

bers of single-parent and "blended" families, which involve parents and children from earlier marriages. By 1995, McCord predicted, the number of single-parent and blended families will exceed the number of families with intact marriages.

"Our ideal was to have two parents, never divorced, living under the same roof," he said in an interview with the *Catholic Courier*. "It is still the norm in terms of our ideals. But it is not the norm in terms of numbers."

In fact, McCord observed, the ideal family many people still envision was based on an essentially short-lived phenomenon.

"Family change has been a constant throughout modern history," McCord said, observing that the "ideal" existed only for a relatively brief period of time following World War II.

"What you have then is a sort of deviation from the pattern of change that was already underway," he said.

McCord noted that women had worked outside the home prior to World War II, and that the pre-war period also was marked by a growing divorce rate. In the post-war period, however, the United States embarked on a period of prosperity that enabled families to survive on the husbands' incomes alone. The late-1940s and '50s also were a time of "stability" in which the divorce rate declined, he noted.

This trend began subsiding in the 1960s, when the older patterns of change re-emerged, McCord said.

The primary difference today, McCord remarked, is not the changes in family life but the rate at which they are occurring.

"The pace of change has rapidly accelerated in the last 20 to 30 years," he said.

As the modern family continues to adjust to changing attitudes toward women's roles, it also must contend with a rise in the divorce rate, McCord said. But perhaps the biggest problem confronting the American family is the lack of time together, he remarked.

"When you ask families what they need most," McCord explained, "most of the time they say, 'Time. Time to be together as a family.'"

The lack of time to be together and the multitude of other pressures affecting families are pushing the Catholic Church to focus more attention on the family, observed Don Paglia, president of the National Association of Catholic

Family Life Ministers.

The most recent manifestation of that concern, Paglia told the *Catholic Courier*, is a document issued by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in November, 1991.

The statement, entitled *Putting Children and Families First: A Challenge for Our Church, Nation and World*, has "a very strong emphasis on a family perspective in what we do," Paglia said. "There is a whole need to look at what we do both in church and out of the church with a family sensitivity."

He said that sensitivity is leading more parishes to consider family problems. U.S. parishes and dioceses now are offering more extensive marriage-preparation programs to help head off potential problems, he noted.

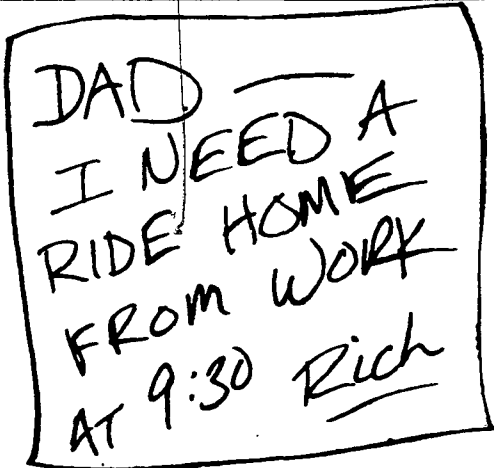
Meanwhile, Paglia added, churches are assessing how parish activities — and the scheduling thereof — can affect families. "It's a matter of scrutinizing the way they do the things they do and taking into account the family," he said.

Improvements can be made easily in some areas, Paglia said. Parishes can try to schedule events around family schedules and encourage more time together, he said. In some parishes, for example, liturgical ministry coordinators try to ensure that family members involved in different ministries — such as server, lector and eucharistic minister — are all assigned to the same Mass so "we don't have families going to four or five different Masses," he said.

Parishes also can reach out to address the needs of contemporary families.

At Good Shepherd the rapid turnover in parishioners has spurred the parish to host several "welcoming Masses" each year, Britton said. In addition to being greeted at the beginning of the service, these new church members are treated to a coffee hour after Mass to meet with the ministerial staff and other parishioners.

The parish also offers a number of support groups to help parishioners weather various family problems, Britton said. Good Shepherd offers support groups for co-dependents; divorced, separated and widowed individuals; and for those who are grieving the loss of loved ones. The Henrietta church is also attempting to create a support group for children who have experienced separation and divorce.



Sacramental programs also have been restructured to provide instruction for several children from the same family at the same time. That change, coupled with increased parental involvement, helps to make the sacramental family events, Britton said.

"We need to be very flexible," she remarked. "That's one of the key things for dealing with families today."

Yet another key element is child-care. Whereas the church at one time had concerned itself with creating schools, hospitals and orphanages to meet the needs of children, McCord said "the issue today is day care — who is caring for the children?"

At St. Anne's Church, Palmyra, the need for some kind of child-care became obvious in 1984.

"A lot of teens began working at (after-school jobs)," observed Joanne Amato, director of the latchkey program at St. Anne's. "They're not doing babysitting after school."

Over the years, the program has evolved to include sessions before and after school, as well as all-day child care during the school year. A complementary pre-school program has also developed. Meanwhile, the parish is exploring the possibility of expanding the day-care program into vacation periods and perhaps eventually becoming a year-round operation.

Such programs are part of an increasing emphasis on the family at all church levels, McCord said.

"Church leadership has become, in the last 20 years, more informed and a lot more vocal about family life, and has done so in a way that recognizes the changes," McCord observed.

"This is not to say we didn't do things in the past," he concluded, "but the issue of families is being taken a lot more seriously."

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