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Harmony in Marriage:

6. Religion

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Marital Stability And Church Participation

According to the signs, "The family that prays together stays together." According to the researchers, the signs are right. Religious families have a lower divorce rate than nonreligious families. Burgess and Cottrell have shown that Sunday school and church attendance before marriage lead to success in marriage. Locke finds that couples headed for divorce attend church much less than happily married couples. In his study, "never going to church" was associated with marital maladjustment, and "going four or more times a month" was associated with marital success. Especially in the latter half of marriage, couples in trouble drop out of church.

Chesser, in a study involving women patients of English physicians, found that the marital happiness of these women was directly proportional to the frequency of the husband's and wife's church attendance. Thus, where both the husband and wife attended church regularly, 91 per cent of the wives evaluated their marriages as exceptionally or very happy, 8 per cent said they were fairly happy, and only 1 per cent said their marriages were unhappy or very unhappy. Where the wife occasionally attended and the husband never, 55 per cent of the wives evaluated their marriages as exceptionally or very happy, 33 per cent as fairly happy, and 12 per cent as unhappy or very unhappy. Burchinal, in a study involving husbands, has shown that married satisfaction for husbands too is associated with regular church attendance.

One of the first studies of representative American youth in the late 1930's found a striking connection between religious affiliation and family stability. Of the 13,000 young people studied, less than 7 per cent of those from religious backgrounds came from broken homes, in contrast to 16.7 per cent of those who came from non-church families. A study of 4,108 fami-

lies of students at Michigan State University by Landis 10 years later gave substantially parallel findings. Three times as many non-church marriages had ended in divorce or separation as had the Catholic, Jewish, or Protestant marriages.

Thus, in every study, church-related families have been shown to be more stable than non-religiously oriented families.

Religious Compatibility

But the studies also emphasize the importance of religious compatibility. Divorce rates are higher in inter-faith marriages than in marriages where both the husband and wife have the same faith. Landis' study shows that the divorce rate in inter-faith marriages is roughly three times the divorce rate in homes where both are of the same faith. When the father is Catholic and the mother is Protestant, the divorce rate is about four times as great as in homes where both are of the same faith. One study in Iowa shows that marriages in which both the husband and wife are Catholic have half the divorces of the marriages in which one member is Catholic and one Protestant.

From the first contact, the inter-faith combination is more vulnerable to breakups. Fewer inter-faith steadies survive to become engaged, and the breaking of inter-faith engagements is high. Burgess and Wallin found that 41 per cent of their inter-faith couples broke their engagements, compared with 27 per cent of the couples belonging to the same church.

Despite these discouraging statistics, the rate of inter-faith marriages is high. Of all marriages in the three major religious bodies (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish), 6.4 per cent are mixed, according to U. S. Census statistics of 1958. According to these figures, Roman Catholics most frequently marry outside their church (21.2% marry Protestants, 0.4% marry Jews).

Jews are least likely to marry outside their faith (4.2% marry Protestants, 3.0% marry Roman Catholics). Protestants are in-between (8.4% marry Roman Catholics, 0.2% marry Jews).

It is therefore obvious that *religion can be an integrating or disintegrating influence in marriage depending upon whether the husband and wife are religiously compatible*. Of course, religious compatibility depends upon factors other than just church affiliation. A husband or a wife may differ in the depth of their faith and convictions; one may be intensely loyal to his own religious group, the other indifferent. Families sometimes put enormous pressures upon their married children to remain faithful each to his own church. This family pressure causes discord between the couple. Sometimes husbands and wives differ in their views on matters of conventionality such as attending Sunday movies, dancing, drinking, or smoking. Jewish families differ tremendously on the strictness with which they observe kosher or other Orthodox regulations. Catholics vary greatly in the extent to which they observe Holy Days. Tremendous differences exist among Protestants on such matters as the interpretation of Scripture (fundamentalism versus modernism), the beliefs in certain doctrines or dogmas (liberals versus orthodox), views on communion (open versus closed communion), or forms of worship (liturgical versus free worship).

Each husband and wife, therefore, should be open-minded and frank about religious views and philosophies. *Where there are differences, couples should face them frankly, seek agreement where possible, and agree at least to accept disagreements, to understand and be tolerant of different views if a consensus cannot be reached*. Certainly the new spirit of ecumenicity and religious harmony among Protestants and Catholics will have a different influence upon the willingness of couples in Protestant-Catholic marriages to tolerate and understand differences.

Religious Observances In The Home

Families differ tremendously in the extent and type of religious practices in the home. The most frequent religious ritual is grace at meals. Fairchild and Wynn reported from their studies of Protestant families in 1960 that 70 per cent of these families regularly said a blessing before meals. The form varies from faith to faith and family to family.

Some families place great emphasis upon religious holidays. Such occasions bring families together, build unity, a feeling of concern, and understanding.

Regular family worship, which is more time-consuming than saying grace, is practiced infrequently by Protestant families. Fairchild and Wynn found

that only five per cent of Protestant families practice it regularly. Those families that do practice it find it a rewarding experience. Some have worship upon arising in the morning, others around the breakfast or dinner table, others after supper, or before bedtime at night. Some families use regular rituals or formal prayers prescribed by their church. Others read Scripture, prayer books, Bible stories, religious literature or sing hymns.

Religious Participation In The Community

Churches serve families at the most important times of their lives. Over 88 per cent of all couples are married in a religious ceremony conducted by an ordained clergyman. The minister, priest, rabbi, or a representative of the church, calls on the young mother at the birth of her baby. The infant child is taken to church for baptizing, dedication, or christening. Most families call upon the church to help with the religious education of the children, to provide worship opportunities, or to offer means of serving the community or world. The church serves the family in hours of financial stress, anxiety, and bereavement. Thus, as Elton Trueblood says, "in the common ventures of life" the church reaches out to comfort, support, help and, in some instances, to save families.

Studies reveal that more people take their troubles to the clergy than to any other profession. The following table is adapted from the book, *Americans View Their Mental Health*, by Geraud Gurin and others, 1960.

Sources of Professional Help

Sources of Help Used	Marriage Problems	Other Personal Problems
Clergyman	44%	39%
Doctor	23	31
Psychiatrist	12	17
Marriage Counselor	8	1
Other Agencies	7	10
Lawyer	6	3
	100%	101%

The community would be poorer indeed if it were not for the churches. Family life is supported, strengthened, and fed at all stages of its growth by the spiritual bread which the churches provide.

But the church cannot exist without the support of families. Just as religion profoundly affects family life, so the family influences the quality of religion in the community. The family and church need to work together to solve social problems, to strengthen moral fiber, to educate children and youth, and to reach out into the wider world to build "the Brotherhood of Man" and "Fatherhood of God." No community can be stronger than its families. So both the family and the church have a stake in "promoting the practice of the faith."

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