

**“CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH”**

**By Carri & Gordon Taylor**

**With Dr. Gary Demarest**

Carri and Gordon Taylor’s stepfamily journey began in 1986. They brought 5 children to the marriage. They have 10 grandchildren between them and are raising Carri’s oldest biological granddaughter who is 16 and has been with them since birth. For more information on their professional lives and ministry, visit [www.cgtaylor.com](http://www.cgtaylor.com). Carri produced an eight-part DVD/VHS Series available for purchase at [www.DesigningDynamicStepfamilies.com](http://www.DesigningDynamicStepfamilies.com).

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All text in italicized quotes is from Dr. Gary Demarest, who appeared in the Film Series, *PIECES TO PEACE* (1984), produced by Carri Taylor when she was a single divorced parent and owner of *New Liberty Films*. Dr. Demarest has been a Presbyterian Minister since 1950. He is highly respected within the Presbyterian denomination. He was Moderator of the Synod of Southern California and Moderato of the Presbytery of San Fernando. He served the General Assembly on the Commission of Ecumenical Relations, Council on Church and Race, and was National Presbyterian Church Preacher of the Year. He has been an Adjunct Professor at Fuller Theological Seminary and San Francisco Theological Seminary. He was a Trustee at Fuller Theological Seminary, San Francisco Theological Seminary and Whitworth College. Above and beyond all that he was a Pastor to Carri during the latter part of her first marriage, when her divorce hit and afterwards as she was rebuilding her life as a divorced single businesswoman.

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The purpose of the church from the beginning has been that of developing and maintaining relationships: first and foremost our relationship with Christ, and second only to that, our relationships with others. (Matthew 22:37-40). In our society "because of the hardness of their hearts" we find families breaking up in record numbers, children paying a heavy emotional and behavioral price. More help is being provided by the church to support divorced parents who are dealing one of life's greatest traumas. At the same time, when these individuals go on to remarry, there is a huge lack of recognition that the difference between first and subsequent marriages is the difference between “apples and oranges” (more later). They are both “fruits’ but each have their own characteristics. Therefore, support for and knowledge of what makes a stepfamily (remarriage) work is not available. The charge to the church still remains to help establish and re-establish healthy and productive relationships that will enable the individuals involved to regain a strong spiritual foundation and break the cycle of redivorce.

The National Stepfamily Resource Center has the best statistical information. Here is a link for facts, myths and frequently asked questions. <http://www.stepfamilies.info/faqs/facts.php>.

These facts alone are overwhelming in their impact on the mission and programs of the church. Historically, the church has been an anchor to bring balance and stability to our society. This is becoming more and more difficult to do, because the church must “flex” in order to deal with the

realities that modern day society presents. We must go to them, in other words, be “fishers of men.”

To accomplish this task of restoring relationships, supporting the divorced parent and preparing them for the possibility of another marriage, it is our belief that the church needs to consider doing the following:

### **1. Acknowledge that Divorced Parent Families and Stepfamilies exist.**

There seems to be an attitude of fear among many church staff that think by acknowledging the divorced parent and stepfamily, they are "encouraging" divorce. *“We believe the church is here to proclaim God's design: one man with one woman for life. But we also believe that the church is here to deal with the human reality of sin and failure. This creates great tension because the church seems to be more comfortable in the role of prophet and preserver of the traditions than in the role of healer and forgiver, especially when it comes to marriage and divorce. Yet, the Bible, from start to finish, is the story of God's way of dealing with people in their failures. “From Adam and Eve.....to Moses, the murderer.....to David, the adulterer.....and even to Peter in his denial.*

*“Divorce, in and of itself may not be "The Sin," but rather a product of a lot of sins. If sin is defined as "missing the mark and falling short," then when a marriage relationship that is designed to be life-long is broken, that represents the sins of commission and omission that happened along the way. Divorce doesn't take place when the paperwork is signed, but rather months and even years earlier when there is an emotional and spiritual death in the relationship.*

*“Divorce can be most threatening to those who are rather insecure in their own marriages and are afraid that they may not make it. Or to those that are simply grinning and bearing it, without a lot of joy or trying to make their marriage better.”* We have also observed the attitude from some that by acknowledging the single parent or stepfamily, divorce might be "catching."

The problem then becomes maintaining the balance of preaching and upholding God's ideal for the family, while still dealing with the reality of broken homes. When this is not done, many divorced parents and stepfamilies believe that there is no place for them in the church, or if there is, it is one of a "second class citizen," stripped of any right to or possibility of serving in the church.

### **2. Create a Safe and Supportive Place for Divorced Parents and their Children.**

Single again is not the same as being single the first time. Singleness the first time is growth-oriented and a logical part of life's developmental cycle. The pain of divorce after having bonded in marriage is a deep emotional wound caused by two people being ripped and torn apart.

*“There are two extremes that need to be avoided by the single parent. One is becoming bitter because of the previous pain and avoiding any future relationships altogether. The other is running too quickly to a new relationship in the hopes that this new marriage will heal all the wounds and make everything OK.”* Some even believe the myth that this new marriage will pick up where the last one left off.

Many times because of the shredded and shattered feeling divorce leaves with an individual, the misconception looms large that another relationship or person will fill all the holes (needs and

insecurities) that have been left. *“But, for subsequent marriages to succeed, healing needs to take place prior to engaging in a new covenant. This healing can be measured by the fact that all feelings toward the former spouse, good and bad, have become neutral.”* The opposite of love is not hate. Both are an intense emotional bonding. Many times people can be bound together stronger in hate than they ever were in love. The opposite of love is neutrality (indifference).

Healing is evident when my former spouse doesn't occupy all my thoughts and cannot provoke me to react when we encounter one another. How is this possible? This can only be accomplished by understanding the grieving and healing process of divorce recovery. A major part of this also includes understanding and applying forgiveness. The initial purpose of forgiveness is to free me from the tyranny of the past. The definition we like the most is, ‘I give up the right to hurt you back.’ (Terry Hershey [www.terryhershey.com](http://www.terryhershey.com)). The spiritual guideline comes from Matthew 6:14-15 *“For if you forgive men (your ex) when they sin against you, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins (this includes you and your ex), your Father will not forgive your sins.”* While this may seem impossible to do at a given time, it is both spiritually and psychologically sound.

On the flip side of the devastation can be the tremendous opportunity for spiritual and personal growth. It's important for the divorced parent to have a safe place to become whole: spiritually, emotionally and relationally. What better role for the church to play than that of a safe place?

In addition, the church could take into account the pain of the children, who are the innocent victims of divorce. Children don't get divorced; their parents do. Unfortunately, many children think they were divorced also, and may even believe they were responsible for it. According to Furstenberg & Spanier (1984) within the first five years over 50% of children lose contact with their non-custodial parent, usually the father. We would safely assume that this percentage has increased.

The children believe they've been rejected, abandoned and they experience extreme loss. Children have a tough time with the concept that there is enough love to go around and that loving begets more love. This sets up a tremendous loyalty conflict issue between the children and their now divorced parents. This loyalty conflict also includes stepparents.

In trying to deal with their pain, children often will hold themselves together while the parent is falling apart, trying to stabilize and create some sense of security (foundation). Once they perceive healing has taken place by their divorced parent(s) getting on with their life, or by remarriage, the children may decide it's their turn to feel the pain. This usually takes the form of "acting out" (negative behavior) which brings great distress to the divorced parent or remarried couple.

Not having a safe place to grieve their losses and express feelings, children can also think that their needs for family will be met only if their parents remarry. In contrast, they may be against any new relationships altogether. These beliefs skip the recovery process through which the church could lead them. (See #4, "Resources the Church can offer".)

### **3. Recognize that Divorced Parent Families and Stepfamilies are Different from Biological Intact Families.**

One of the biggest "family" secrets prevalent in churches today is the number of stepfamilies in attendance. Divorced parents are obvious. Unfortunately, a remarried couple can initially "look" like any other first married couple. They may even refer to "his" and "her" children as "ours." This can lead them and those around them into deception as to how to deal with the problems that will be, or already are surfacing.

*"Frequently, the question of a second or subsequent marriage is more complicated than the question of the divorce itself. When the church has learned to forgive, in the case of divorce, there is still the question, 'Does the person have a right to a complete, open-ended choice in the future?'"*

*"There are many times when the single parent is denied the right to another marriage. Some think that they are just not entitled to another chance. Nothing can be more painful to the person who struggles with that than to be rejected by the Christian community and denied the right to the kind of openness that God's forgiveness certainly brings."*

No one likes divorce, especially those of us that have experienced it. No one we have talked to was planning on divorce. On the contrary, we expected to be married for life, but that's not the way it happened. It takes two to make a relationship and only one to break it apart.

In contrast to being denied the chance for remarriage, there can be the faulty concept fostered in churches that the divorced parent graduates from the singles' group by remarriage, as if the divorced parent is now healed. It can be more comfortable to see divorced parents remarried because externally, the differences are no longer obvious in an environment where couples are the norm.

If the church's desire is to keep divorced parent families and stepfamilies within the fellowship, it will help to understand that the structure and dynamics of first and subsequent marriage

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relationships are very different. They are as different as apples and oranges. The Biblical model for marriage works as God intended when the biological family stays intact. The couple relationship leads all other relationships in development and existence.

In contrast, when you have a divorced parent family, the couple relationship is not only broken, but also usually conflictual and chaotic. The children often move to a "parentified" role, delaying their own development. They many times think it is necessary to take care of their parents.

When you have a stepfamily, all other relationships in the new family predate the couple's relationship. Children feel displaced. Biological parents believe they are caught in the middle due to their attempts to please their children, their ex-spouse and their new mate. The stepparent, being the "new kid on the block," thinks they are an outsider trying to get into the already existing family system.

Divorced parents entering remarriage unprepared for these different dynamics are more likely to repeat the re-divorce pattern and end up re-entering the single's group. We call this the "recycling syndrome". Education is necessary to understand these differences. Consequently, preparation for marriage and remarriage is very different.

The Biblical principles that Jesus modeled must be taught and incorporated into the divorced parent family and the stepfamily. The principles of: forgiveness, anger management, the fruits of the Spirit, understanding love, understanding "servant" leadership (to name a few); show us how to relate to others.

The church, in doing this, gives the members of single divorced parent families and stepfamilies a chance to break the re-divorce cycle and create healthy relationships. This may call for a new look at redefining some basic concepts that Christians hold regarding "headship," "leadership," and "submission."

#### **4. Resources that the Church can offer**

##### **a. Divorce Recovery Workshops (for Adults and Children).**

Divorce recovery is basic. Time alone doesn't heal; it's what is done with that time that determines whether recovery from the wounds will take place. Loss & conflict are key issues and the conflict can go on for years between ex-spouses. This is what continues to wound the children involved.

It's Biblical to be single, but not alone. If indeed Christianity is a relationship, the divorced parent

will benefit from having healthy adult relationships to continue the healing process.

Divorce recovery is actually the beginning of preparing for remarriage. The value is not only to be a healthy single, but a prospective whole partner if remarriage is going to be considered in the future.

**b. Single Parenting Education and Support.**

It is imperative to understand the problems involved in this new relational territory. Men and women have unique needs. For women, it is usually external situations: housing, money, childcare, possible re-entry into the workplace. For men, it is emotional issues; recognizing relational loss, custodial responsibilities and the temptation to NOT deal with their own personal growth issues.

**c. Personal Growth Seminars and Workshops.**

1. Understanding historical relationship issues from one's family of origin and previous marriage.
  2. Rediscovering whom God designed you to be (personality type) due to loss of identity during their previous relationship (marriage).
  3. Re-building the future by understanding God's purpose and direction for the rest of your life.
- For many, this is starting over - picking up the pieces.

**d. Preparation for Relationships and Remarriage Classes.**

This starts with divorce recovery, continues with personal growth and culminates in the ability to recognize other healthy individuals. Dating is now defined as a discovery process where essential ingredients for a successful relationship and non-negotiables (foundational personal issues) are identified and discussed.

**e. Education on Stepfamily Dynamics.**

For stepfamilies to succeed it is crucial to:

- Understand the basic differences between first and subsequent marriages
- Understand the stepfamily development cycle
- Understand step-parenting – what will and won't work
- Understand that these families and the couple relationship form backwards from first marriages.
- Understand how children, ex-spouses, extended family, money and possessions will impact the new marriage and family.
- Understand how to design a stepfamily that works.

Churches that have successfully integrated divorced parents and stepfamilies have addressed the above issues and provided the resources to keep them in the fellowship. *“God hates divorce*

***Challenge to the Church***

By Carri & Gordon Taylor w/ Dr. Gary Demarest

Page 7

*enough to die for it, to make the person whole again and pick of the pieces of the person's life and put them back together again."* We as the Church can do the same.