

Caring for Children in Crisis

BY HELEN WILSON HARRIS

How should we respond to the pain and grief of our children in crises of sexual abuse, divorce, and death?

These resources provide useful information and direction for churches that are willing to become the hands, arms, and kindness of Christ in loving His “little ones.”

My ten-year-old daughter was in grief overload. “Mama, it’s just too much death,” she said, for we had lost several close friends in the past year or so.

Part of that is my fault, because I have made sure that my children know older adults and spend time with them in their homes and in nursing facilities. Several of those adults have died recently. Moreover, she has had four children and a teacher in her school killed in accidents in the past year. My daughter has been to more funerals in a year than I attended in my entire youth. Add to that the death of her favorite cat, constant television images of a distant but very real war in Iraq, and ongoing concerns about terrorism, and my child was distraught.

My daughter’s trauma is not unique among children. The middle-school students in the Sunday School class which I teach, pray each week for dying family members, relatives deployed in the Middle East, and personal peace. One asked recently: “Mrs. Harris, is it wrong to be afraid?” Another student asked if we could talk in Sunday School about how to “deal with my evil stepmother.” A colleague of mine commented recently that more than half of the children in her congregation are the product of “broken homes.” The brokenness comes from damaged church relationships as well; the church has been challenged recently with disclosures of child sexual abuse within congregations. Loss of life, loss of family, loss of safety, and loss of innocence are crises for our children that demand our attention and care.

Theresa Huntley's *Helping Children Grieve: When Someone They Love Dies*, 2nd ed. (Augsburg Fortress, 2002 [1991]; 144 pp., \$12.99), R. Timothy Kearney's *Caring for Sexually Abused Children: A Handbook for Families & Churches* (InterVarsity Press, 2001; 139 pp., \$10.00), and Douglas Adams' *Children, Divorce and the Church* (Abingdon Press, 1992; 119 pp., \$12.95) provide families, lay volunteer helpers, and professional helpers with a fresh look at childhood grief and wise advice about congregational care for children in crisis. These three brief but pertinent guides are written with a Christian worldview, but from different professional discipline perspectives. Theresa Huntley writes as a clinical social worker who has hospital experience with dying and grieving children. Dr. R. Timothy Kearney, a clinical psychologist and theologian, writes from the perspective of a community mental health professional. Douglas Adams, Senior Minister at South Side Christian Church in Lima, Ohio writes from his experience as a child whose parents divorced, and whose needs for information and community were not met by his pastor and church.

THE CRISIS OF DIVORCE

The word "crisis" understates the exigency of divorce in our country. Search the internet for "Children and Divorce" and you will find several sites offering easy, online divorces. Thousands of children are the subjects of custody orders; close to fifty percent of children spend at least part of their youth in single-parent homes. For many children, the challenge of their parents' divorce is only somewhat mitigated by remarriage. In *Children, Divorce and the Church*, a book in the Creative Leadership Series edited by Lyle E. Schaller of the Yokefellow Institute, Pastor Douglas Adams recalls the devastation he felt as a child when his father left the family. Adams was further wounded when the pastor came to their home and offered support to his mother, but ignored him and his siblings. He makes a strong case for the role of the church and the pastor in ministering to the children of divorce: "If my pastor had stopped to talk to me that summer afternoon when my dad left, maybe my life would have been different today" (p. 115). Adams discusses the impact of divorce upon children and encourages parents, extended family, and congregational families to provide care for them. He recommends preparation, information, clarification, and ongoing discussion with children in families dealing with divorce.

Adams urges pastors who are counseling divorcing parents to equip them to support and nurture their children. He advocates giving information to children that prepares them to handle family changes, and for involving children in decisions that affect the whole family. While the work is helpful, one limitation of this book is its narrow scope. For the most part, Adams addresses divorces that mirror his own family's experience. While some of his suggestions are generalizable, others are not. The reader should consider other references as well that address a broader

range of circumstances and responses. For example, when there is neglect and abuse by a parental figure, ongoing contact with that parent must be limited by safety concerns. Additionally, care must be taken not to focus too much on a child's choice of custodial parent, thus leaving them torn between two parents. Adams paints with a fairly broad brush the recommendations he makes. Though the general themes of preparation, support, and communication are applicable in most situations, a number of the guidelines are narrowly directed to experiences similar to the author's. Finally, Adams wisely recommends that congregations offer support groups to children of divorce. (The book includes support group guidelines and a list of additional resources.) But the importance of recruiting professionals who are both knowledgeable and experienced in working with children and loss is not emphasized.

THE CRISIS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Added to the crises of loss through death and divorce for our children is the crisis of loss of innocence. Discussion of child sexual abuse remains a taboo subject in most congregations; the church is markedly silent, though the topic is frequently the interest of television talk shows and docudramas. The media focus has been on the years of child sexual abuse by priests in the Catholic Church. Yet that information has come with the awareness that child sexual abuse is not just about male priests struggling with vows of chastity and with homosexuality; sexual abuse of children is perpetrated by adults of all faiths and no faith.

Timothy Kearney's courageous and well-written book, *Caring for Sexually Abused Children*, begins with an example of disclosure of sexual abuse to a staff member in a congregation. He takes on the very difficult issue of sexual abuse by ministers and church staff, and the broader issue of congregations dealing with the ramifications of child sexual abuse perpetrated by those outside of the church. Dr. Kearney is able to speak both the language of professional clinical practice and the language of the church.

Kearney displays broad knowledge of the legal definitions of child sexual abuse, yet balances this technical information with a moving treatment of the physical, behavioral, emotional, relational, and spiritual signs of sexual abuse. He makes the case that we need to pay more attention to children—looking intently for the signs that suggest abuse is about to happen, or has already happened—and to recognize that the perpetrator often uses the cloaks of religion, Scripture, and paternalism to accomplish the abuse. Kearney offers clear steps for ministers and congregational leaders dealing with a child who discloses sexual abuse, and information about the criminal and human services systems that respond to child sexual abuse. Skillful listening to disclosures, mandated reporting, managing information within the congregation, and negotiating the systems involved are all addressed with very specific guidelines and case examples.

An important contribution of Kearney's work is its careful treatment of ways that Christian communities can minister not only to abused children and their families, but also to their pastors and other professional caregivers. He contrasts the tendency toward labeling and gossip in churches, with the congregation's opportunity to be a model of grace for those dealing with the shame and guilt that accompany sexual abuse. Kearney assesses when challenges can be managed in the church and when referral for therapy is indicated. Victims wonder, "Where was God?" and "Why did He allow this?" Kearney explores the church's pastoral role in bringing spiritual healing gradually through worship, sacraments, and prayer. Because the impact of abuse is experienced over a long period of time, the church's ministry to victims must be long-term as well.

The strengths of *Caring for Sexually Abused Children* are the author's willingness to address honestly child sexual abuse occurring in the church, his treatment of methods to prevent abuse in the church, and his evaluation of techniques to recognize and address it when it occurs.

THE CRISIS OF DEATH

Adams and Kearney address the adjustment to loss that occurs in children experiencing divorce and suffering sexual abuse. The crisis of loss through death is the focus of Theresa Huntley's book, *Helping Children Grieve*. In this wonderfully written, forthright book, Huntley, a social worker with years of experience with dying and grieving children, gives practical information about the needs of dying children and their families. She includes case examples that are touching and instructive. This is not an in-depth theoretical treatise on children's grief, or a workbook for exercises with grieving children. It is, simply put, the basic information that adults need about the grief of children and how helping professionals and congregations can minister to children and their families through death and loss.

Huntley encourages us to educate young people about how death is a part of every life, and tells us how to respond to children when a loved one dies, while being sensitive to the child's age and ability to comprehend the permanence of death. Children are involved in multiple social institu-

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tions like schools, clubs, teams, and churches; adults and peers in all these institutions can play key roles supporting our children. This is the practical guidebook that belongs on every pastor's and teacher's bookshelf. It is not theoretical or contemplative, but is instructive and guided by the author's extensive experience and care.

A CARING COMMUNITY FOR "THESE LITTLE ONES"

As members of the church that follows the One who instructed us to "let the little children come to me" (Matthew 19:13), we must want to respond to and care for the pain of children. These three resources will add knowledge to our willingness. One of my favorite pictures when I was a child depicted Christ surrounded by children and had this caption:

I wish that His hands had been placed on my head,
That His arms had been thrown around me,
And that I might have seen His kind look when He said,
"Let the little ones come unto me."

Jemima T. Luke (1841)

I submit that His hands have been placed on my head by a loving pastor and his wife who were with me in the emergency room when a family member was critically injured. His arms have been thrown around me by Sunday School teachers and youth ministers at times when my life was in crisis. I have seen His kind look in the eyes of Christians in social work, psychology, and education who serve both in churches and in places of business. The church continues to be the hands, arms, and kindness of Christ in action. These resources provide us useful information and direction for loving Christ's "little ones."



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