

PASTORAL CARE FOR SINGLE PARENTS

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The goal of this project was to put in place for the first time in my church a Single Parent Support Group that would enhance the overall structure of the single parent family. In the following five chapters both clinical and spiritual principals are used to accomplish this objective.

This project has helped to increase the self-esteem of both the parents and the children. Participation in this project has allowed the single parent families to access their own inter-strengths to improve their family structure and family foundation. The project has taught the families the importance of relationships and how these relationships can positively or negatively affect the structures of the family.

The project is divided first into the background, needs and the importance to ministry associated with single parent families. Secondly it is then followed by the guiding religious and clinical principals for this project. And lastly is the actually execution of the project inclusive of evaluation and discussion.

To accomplish the project a single parent support group was formed. Many books, articles and government census statistics were used. Additional visual hands on creative games were used to assist in developing a deeper understanding of the family structures.

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INTRODUCTION

This project's goal is to put in place, in my church, for the first time, a Single Parent Support Group. Through clinical and spiritual interventions, the overall structure of the single parent family will be enhanced, decreasing the possibility of their becoming a part of the negative statistics associated with the single parent families. The aim of the Single Parent Support Group (SPSG) is to provide a safe place to which parents can come together to express their needs, concerns, and emotions. It is hoped that insightful information will be gained from the group discussions, allowing for the setting in place of resources that will be beneficial to the families and group members as a whole.

Based on my observations of my congregation and various other communities, Pastoral Care/Counseling and the support of Single Parents are issues that seem to need immediate attention. My opinion is also informed by conversations I have had with colleagues vis-a-vis their pastoral oversight of their congregations. Personally, I have found that the education, mental health, physical health, and behaviors of children can be unfavorably shaped by the absence of one parent.

A person may find himself/herself in the situation of single parenthood as a result of one or more of the circumstances outlined below:

- Single by choice – the person has chosen not to have a partner in raising the child, i.e adoption or preference

- Single not by choice and not married- the other parent has elected not to have an active role in raising the children
- Divorced- the parent is single as results of a divorce
- Widow or widower - the parent is single as a result of the death of his or her spouse

For the purposes of this project, all four of these circumstances will be considered together under one heading: the single parent group. This is to facilitate cohesion in the group.

A primary goal of the project is to let the single parents know that some of us do recognize and acknowledge some of the issues they are experiencing and that we are making an attempt to help them deal with them. This SPSG shall seek to convey to the single parents that they are not alone in these circumstances and that they can find hope and support not only in their religion, but also from the members of the group.

The issues related to the single parent family can have serious psychological impact on the family members to the extent that such symptoms or maladies as feelings of loneliness, guilt, fears, abandonment, and distress may be induced. There are times when the single parent might suffer from the affects of being torn apart especially when he/she is not able to spend adequate time with the children due to his/her having to attend to the immediate temporal needs of the family unit. The spiritual and psychological dynamics will be combined in the

support offered to the single parent family in order to help the single parents to understand that their religion, in this case at least, can be comforting and supportive. The scriptures teach us in John 14:18 that God is constantly and consistently present: "I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you." In other words, the single parent family will know that God sees what they are experiencing and that God is present and available to and for them. Isaiah 58:9 teaches us "then you will call and the Lord will answer, you will cry for help and he will say 'here am I'". The goal is to comfort and inspire through clinical and spiritual intervention.

This project will try to normalize the feelings that the single parents experience, that their individual and specific experiences are not isolated, that most if not all single parents have had similar feelings about their situation. They might feel from time to time that they had had enough of the loneliness and anger and disgust. This project will seek to furnish the parents with the tools for them to help normalize the experiences of their children and so reduce incidences of low-self esteem, acting out, rebellion, blaming themselves for the other parent's absence or blaming the custodial parent for the absence of the other.

Before I decided on a final topic, I did some research to make sure that my observations were in line with current interest in the field. When I Googled the topic I was surprised to find that there were some 24,700,000 sites dealing with issues related to single parenting. The

prognosis presented by a great deal of the material was especially harsh and dire for the lives of the children who survived single parenting. In 2000 the census reported that there were 10 million single parents. Upon further research I discovered that according to the United States Census Bureau's August 2007 findings, in 2005 there were approximately 13.6 million single parents in the United States and that they were responsible for raising 21.2 million children. This is an increase of 3.6 million and the numbers are increasing daily.

The issue that concerned me when I observed my congregation and other faith communities, now exploded in my mind and the need to provide support for single parents took on far deeper and more urgency within my spirit.

In addition, we learn from the statistics that approximately one million teen girls get pregnant each year. Each year approximately three million cases of STD (Sexually Transmitted Diseases) occur among teens (i.e., one in every four). 50% of high school students report abusing alcohol and 52.8 % of high school students report using illicit drugs. These statistics are extremely alarming and surely might be describing what is obvious: unhealthy households. 27.7% of custodial single mothers and their children live in poverty. 11.1% of custodial single fathers and their children live in poverty according to several internet sources. And the data goes on and on.

I am of the mind that the single parents in these households are suffering from the burden of single parenting. Mental and Physical affect are sure to be seen. I believe that together the lack of support systems, the environment, the family structures, and the economic situation all conspire to hold in place and to further create the negative statistics and behaviors associated with being a single parent.

It is the desire of this project to encourage the single parent and show them that there is strength from within themselves upon which they can draw. It is the desire of the project to show the single parent families how they may get beyond the unflattering statistics and excel in areas they might never have dreamed possible for themselves and/or their children. Finally this project endeavors to inspire hope in the single parent hope. Jack Cranfield told of a saying he received from a wise woman and I believe it is helpful to repeat it here: "A wise woman once said, 'As a single parent you carry much of the burden, but you get the majority of the joy'" (Jack Canfield. p.xvi) This project seeks to instill love, hope, joy and understanding.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ISSUES

A. Background

Being a single parent is something that seems to be increasing much too fast. Historically, the tracking of such statistics was mainly geared to women. This was the case even though we always knew that single parenting was not an experience exclusive to women; it was increasingly the experience of men too.

Like single mothers, single fathers need to know that they are not alone in this endeavor. The number of men who are single parents is rising and better statistics are being kept. Statistics show that the number of single father households has more than tripled in the last twenty years. The number of websites and organizations are steadily increasing due to the increased demand being placed on organizations that cater to the single parent families. Similar issues are faced by single parent families whether or not the household is headed by a woman or a man. To some extent, the male headed single parent family might have to work even harder at family cohesion because men are not supposedly born with the innate characteristics of mothering. Unfortunately, for the single father, society still does not look favorably upon single father parenting. Nor does society reach out to a single father in the same way it does to a single mother. Thankfully though, due to the magnifying

voice of single father advocacy groups, societies' attitude may be finally but gradually changing.

In the past, being a single parent was something that families tried to keep very secretive and within the family. If affordable, the pregnant person was sent away until the child was born and then the child would be put up for adoption. In some instances, the mother of the pregnant person would raise the child as their own. In other words the baby became the child of the grandmother and the sibling of the mother.

It was a disgraceful thing for a woman to have a child out of wedlock in the not too distant past. Not only was it disgraceful, but stigmas were attached to it and many of these same stigmas are still being held in place today. The child was labeled illegitimate. Approximately fifty years ago some states even put illegitimate on the child's birth certificate. (Shoshana Alexander, 1994, p.4) In many instances the child was referred to as a bastard. In varying degrees, many of those labels still exist and unfortunately for both the parent and the child, they still burden the family and inflict painful wounds on the life of the child. However, although these labels are still in force and use today, society has become a little more tolerant and accommodating of the single parent household.

Single parenting that results from divorce or the death of a parent, is treated somewhat kinder by society, even in the face of the labels. The children are regarded as different. In the case of a divorce, the child is

related to as the product of a broken home or the remnant of a broken home and a failed marriage. Imagine the pressure exerted on a person to picture the self as broken or looked upon by others as broken or abnormal. The message that is often imbibed by the child is that she/he is damaged. Webster described broken as being shattered, in pieces.

These types of labels can cause disruption in the child's development or an interruption of his/her autonomy. It would be especially hard for the child to have a healthy autonomous sense of self when shame and doubt result from labeling. Labeling creates bad feelings and negative emotions. What would have been normal to identity development, now becomes complicated by excessive self-consciousness, difficulties in forming relationships, problems of belonging, and achievement issues in school.

Both parent and child can become either ego syntonic or ego alien. I have found that labeling pushes some members of the single parent family into the arena of personality disorders, such as narcissism, manifesting as the parent and/or the child lacking of empathy and sympathy for others and becoming obnoxious persons to be around. Paranoia can develop where the person might become overly suspicious of others, lacking of basic trust and thus creating difficulties for the people with whom they must share relationship.

The fact that the single family structure is regarded by some persons as inferior, is a huge problem. This erroneous assessment

produces many physiological concerns for the parent and the child. How does one survive and operate mentally and physically in an environment of so called inferiority? How can parents adequately raise their children when he or she comes home crying and reporting that their friends called them a bastard or are asking them questions like, what is illegitimacy? How does a mother raise a son or a father raise a daughter adequately when the other parent is absent? How do you co-parent? These questions can be unrelenting. Most times not only can they be endless but when they become bottled up inside of parent and child, they can produce the negative characteristics that were referred to earlier. With understanding, caring, direction, and the leveling of resources in favor of single parent families, I believe that we can help eradicate some of the negativity surrounding the single parent family and move more toward the positive reinforcement.

B. Needs

The Bible requires us to feed the sheep as is stated in John 21:17. God knew that the sheep (people) needed to be cared for and this is why I believe that those of us who have been called into the ministry and are believers in God, must take care of the needs of God's sheep.

In my congregation, two of us function as pastoral staff, the Senior Pastor and one Associate Pastor, your humble servant. Anytime a person in the congregation, be it a single parent, family member, senior citizens, etc., requires pastoral care/counseling, that person would seek

out anyone of us. A meeting with the parishioner will be scheduled based on the availability of the clergy. There is no set formalized time or space in which this or ongoing meetings to take place or to have the concerns raised can be addressed. I believe that it would be imperative that both space and time be arranged so as to facilitate the adequate care of the parishioners. I believe that it is also important to note that no one on the entire clergy staff, although all are ordained, has had any formalized training in the specifics of pastoral care/counseling, with one exception, the author of this project who is currently in a training program.

When a single parent schedules an appointment with me, the session always seemed to end with “I wish there was something more. I could really use some support.” In passing, after a service or event, at different times, many members have expressed a need for help for the many single parents in our congregation; or some would intimate concern by sharing saying things like: Reverend, is there a way we can help Sister Jane, she is a single parent you know; or Sister Jane looks like she could use some help, you know she is raising five children on her own or poor Sister Jane working two jobs and trying to raise a family. And the latest one, how can a man raise a child on his own? The comments go on and on but the core message coming from the congregation and the single parents is the same: we need to do something about this ever expanding need for help and support.

The specific needs are usually the same. If I just had some one who is experiencing the same things I am to talk to. I need a minute to myself. Who can I get to talk to my daughter about female issues; you know I am a man? Who can I get to talk to my son about sex? He says I will not understand because I am a woman and his mother? Support! That is what the single parent needs, support. And the one expression that hurts me to the core of my being is this: "I went looking for a clergy person and no one was around so I just let the problem go and now it's gone too far."

It is my intention to discuss and explore with the single parents who become a part of the study group what their feelings are in regards to needs that have arisen as a result of their single parent status. We will explore the needs of the consequences that were birthed from those who became single not by choice and not by marriage. And exploration is still required of the many needs that arise as a result of divorce. And last but not least, this project will minister to the needs of the parent who became a single parent by the death of the other parent. All of these needs will affect the parents, the children and the family structure.

Additionally it is my intention to address issues of parenting. Many parents are feeling overwhelm as a result of single parenthood. Some feel as having been thrust in an unexpected situation while others have no mechanisms or resources to handle the situation neither physically nor emotionally. The children are also forced into a different

life style with the absence of the other parent. Helping the parents in the group to deal with issues around co-parenting, self-esteem of both parent and child, anger, relationship between the child and the custodial parent, is a goal of this project.

For this project it is important to understand and realize that even though I have issues that I feel need to be discussed with the single parents' group, such as those previously stated, the project will allow for the latitude of the single parent to interject their own specific needs. Allowing for this latitude, I believe, will enhance and fortify the single parent support group.

C. Importance to Ministry

James Dittes (1999, page 73) said: **“the counselor is counseling because she or he is called by the most intense and urgent motives to bring others to wholeness and fullness.”** My feelings are clearly reflected in Dittes' statement and the exploration intended by this project, I believe, will have lasting effect for my overall ministry. The development of my congregation's ministry and a better quality of life for both the parent and the child, are what I am striving for. It is a ministry of saving and improving the family.

Starting and implementing a single parents' support ministry will help create a healthier congregational family and assist the single parents in finding the help and support to make it through the times of loneliness and aloneness. The healthier family has less stress and

would therefore be able to deal with the every day issues of life in a more productive way. It is my desire, that by putting in place this type of ministry, the preponderance of the negative statistics in reference to the children of single parent families will change, one parent at a time. On a larger scale, this ministry will help the parents who themselves don't always have a positive outlook about themselves, their own and their children's future. All of these positive reinforcements for the parents and children from within will produce positive results which will help transform the wider community of which they are a part, thereby making the overall community much stronger.

CHAPTER TWO

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

A. Religious Principles

Realizing that there are many factors that affect the life of a single parent family, and in an effort to bring about a more solidified family life through providing support for the single parent family, I will draw on both religious and clinical principles.

The general outlook of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) of which I am a part, is expressed through its mission statement. I believe that this statement will go a long way in helping to frame the theological/religious reference points for this project. However, because it is quite long, I will quote here only the beginning portion of the statement (see Exhibit A for complete statement). The relevant portion is as follows: “The Mission of the African Methodist Episcopal Church is to minister to the spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and environmental needs of all people by spreading Christ’s liberating gospel through word and deed.” I believe that this section of the mission statement sums up in a nut shell, the theological principles and focus of this project effected through the single parent support group. I understand that to be supportive through the teaching of the biblical principles and actually lending a helping hand, is an imperative.

Persons come together as members of this congregation who believe in and are led by this mission statement. Some of these persons

come from and are a part of single parent families, the focus group for this project. It is therefore to be understood that our church believe that there is a spiritual aspect to the human being. Because we are spiritual and Christian, we live out our lives in reference to the Holy Scriptures. These scriptures inspire hope and give direction. For these reasons I will seek to explain, reinforce, and encourage the members of the single parent support group to consolidate the spiritual principles, thus enabling them to better deal with the circumstances that arise as a result of being a part of a single parent family.

The primary instrument utilized to impart the religious principles in the single parent group will be the Holy Bible and specifically the New International Version (NIV) translation which is widely used in my Christian tradition. Throughout the Bible, the principle of unconditional love (agape) is demonstrated through the acts of God in relationship with humankind. The love that God continually expresses toward humankind is the type of love, the glue, which the single parent family will need if they will be successful in establishing a well rounded household. The Bible also talks about the family, its interactions, and how to care and support each other as God cares and supports us. Having a single parent learn and practice these beliefs is critical to the pastoral support of the single parent family.

Additionally, the mission statement requires that the minister addresses the intellectual, physical, emotional, and environmental needs of all people.

The religious principle must take seriously the intellectual needs of the family. The African Methodist Episcopal Church believes that the intellectual needs of human beings must be ministered to because the mind, the intellectual center of our being, controls how one operates in relationship to others and the self. The single parent needs to have a clear understanding on what is happening or not happening within the psyche. If the psyche of a human being is made bitter by anger, resentment, insecurities, feelings of unworthiness and shame, then all of these things that are conditioned by the intellect, will prove to have a negative impact on the family structure. Consequently, members of single parent households (parent and children alike), might turn to alcohol, drugs, gangs and/or other negative behaviors. The negative effects of intellectual corruption can produce physiological problems.

The religious principles also connects with the physical, the body. Ochs in her book, *Our lives as Torah* (2001, p.137) said “the first thing to form the actual content of the human mind is merely the idea of our own body actually existing. Without a body we wouldn’t have a mind. We can think because we have a body and what we think is by the particular body we have. Our bodies take the perceptions that form the contents of our thoughts.” Therefore we should not take the physical body for

granted because without it there is no mind and no us. The scriptures authenticate our need to take care of the body, and that authentication can be found expressed in the New International Bible in Romans 12:1 where it says “Therefore I urge you brothers and in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual act or worship”.

The religious principle interacts with emotional needs. In the African Methodist Episcopal Church’s mission statement, the church recognized that the emotional needs of God’s people were extremely important. Consequently, the elders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church incorporated emotional needs into the focus of the statement so that persons who are authorized to take care of God’s people would be mindful and sympathetic while actually acknowledging the emotional needs of others. It is obvious to me that there are numerous emotions and relationships that are expressed in the single parent family household. The way one feels will motivate his/her actions. The emotional needs are very much a part of a healthier human being thus producing a healthier family and family structure.

The religion also engages the environmental need. All other needs being addressed (the spiritual, intellectual, physical, and emotional needs) are all within the surroundings and are connected to the overall environmental needs. Humankind must take care of the earth in order for the earth to take care of us, the essence of coexistence.

The portion of the mission statement of the African Methodist Episcopal Church from which I earlier quoted, is the primary driving principle that will guide and inform the religious aspects of this project.

B. Clinical Principles

Clinical principles for this single parent support group is not only focus from the parent's perspective but it also brings together with it the children's perspective and both of their surroundings and interventions. For these reasons the particular psychodynamic principle that I will use to assess, facilitate, and improve the relationship of the single parent family for this project is Object Relations Theory.

Object Relations Theory: Object relations is a method used to understand the human behavior, human development and human relationships. The theory holds that human beings have an inborn desire to form and sustain relationships. According to Berzoff (p.127, 2002) Object Relations Theory "explores the process where people come to experience themselves as separate and independent from others, while at the same time needing profound attachment to others". Object relations theory focuses on the interactions persons have with others and how those interactions affect the self when internalized thus affecting psychological development. Object relations includes not only to real relationships with others in the external world but also with the internal relationship to self. Object relations theory deals with how needs are met or not met in relationships.

Object relations theory helps us to understand the psychological and emotional functioning of the parent in relation to the self of the parent, the parent to their children, the children each to his or her self, and to society. The theory helps us to understand life experiences from the child's point of view and this within the structure of the family. This understanding will help us to reduce and eradicate the impact of the negative statistics aforementioned.

Berzoff explains in *Inside Out Outside In* (p.130) that Winnicott (1956), object relation theorists, believed that need has to be met by a person thereby placing the relationship at the center of the experience. Therefore all the interactions and experiences that the members of the single parent family have with each other or with each himself/herself, are centered around need. Whether or not these needs are met, will determine the level of functioning or nonfunctioning of the family and the individual members within the family. When needs are not met, the parental abuse of self and/or the children can happen. When needs are not met from the children's point of view they feel abandon and in most cases try to fulfill these needs in ways that are destructive to themselves such as involving themselves in gang activities and negative behaviors.

The theory talks about attachment and the negative results that can happen if healthy attachments are not formed. Winnicott also talks about the quality of attachments (Berzoff, p.140,2002). In that discussion he argued that attachment needs should be flexible and

genuine thereby producing something called the “True Self” which he believed to be the very essence of the personality. Winnicott believed that the “True self” was where individuality, uniqueness, and differences resided. Winnicott also talked about the “False Self”, where a person suppresses (unconsciously of course) individuation and molds themselves to the needs of others. I believe that the concept of the “True Self” and “False Self” are extremely important to getting the single parent family to understand that they are individuals who can have goals and dreams that are attainable. It is important to reinforce for the single parent family that they don’t have to let their particular situations and circumstances determine who they are and most importantly who they will become.

We all have the desire to be connected and attached to someone. For the single parent, what does being alone mean? Will it create low self esteem? Will they be shunned by society for their situation? What will be the mental effects of single parenting? If the situation occurs during the child’s earliest years of life, will the mother withdraw from meeting the basic needs of the infant because of the situation she/he is forced into? Establishing trust as a result of development, developmental conflict between basic trust versus basic mistrust, is the important developmental task at this stage. According to Erikson (1980), if the basic trust vs. mistrust is not resolved appropriately, then the child might have problems later in life. Given the circumstances and factors

impacting the single family, it is not unlikely to find children who are lacking on several stages of development, thus cultivating the conditions for acting out in early and teen years, and which in turn might escalate into other negative behaviors such as drug abuse, alcohol use, and shoplifting. These children will become adults with psychological maladies and themselves become single parents like their parents.

When the psycho-social needs are not met, which is the case in numerous single family households, we might encounter an increase of anxiety, rage, aggression, depression, anger, guilt, and abuse in the family. These psychological realities might overload the single parent family system and help create unstable relationships. With unstable relationships might come more serious diagnoses like borderline personality disorder. Persons with borderline personality disorder suffer emotional anguish. In some cases, the borderline personality may be characterized by pervasive impulsivity, impaired perception, and impaired reasoning. I believe that other symptoms of borderline personality disorder that may affect the single parent families and on which this project will focus are as follows:

- Depression
- Narcissism – A pervasive pattern of grandiosity, the need for admiration, a lack of empathy
- Avoidant - A pattern of feeling inadequate, feeling socially inhibited, hypersensitive to criticism

- Dependency – Strong feeling for the need for care, cling behaviors, separation fear
- Fear of abandonment

Self Psychology: Another theory that will be drawn upon in the group process that is the basis of this project is self psychology. Berzoff (p.174, 2002), makes an important point when he states that “In object relations theories the self is made up of internal representations of relationships with others.” Self psychology helps us to understand the self as a unified whole. This is critical for this project but especially for the work with the single parent family, that both parent and child know themselves as autonomous wholes and are aware of the effects that being in relationship with each other will have on them. A deeper understanding of the self can be explored with the help of this theory because it allows for recognizing what was missing from and what can be offered to the relationship so as to bring about healing and growth. Healing and growth will be much needed in many a single family and self psychology will prove helpful in facilitating understanding and change in the single parents who participate in the study group experience. This theory places a high premium on individual development.

It is critical to note that most of these issues start to develop early in life, (most times in infancy) and manifest themselves later in life. Some issues may develop at different stages but not manifest until adulthood. It just depends on how the relationships develop and eventually what will

trigger the unresolved issues of earlier stages. Early intervention is essential for the single parent family and so the community, the church, and the wider society must find ways to appropriately and adequately intervene providing skills and resources to improve the overall situation of the single parent family.

C. Other Supporting Resources

In addition to the theological and clinical principles outlined above that will guide my study of the single parent family, I will also draw on other supporting resources.

Promises From God for Parents: One of the religious supporting texts which will be required reading for group members will be *Promises From God for Parents* written by Bishop T.D.Jakes (2006). The single parent support group, a church based group, will benefit from the religious teachings, practices, and beliefs that are consistent with their own experience. The single parent family needs to know and understand what the bible has to say about their life struggles and then connect them in a way that facilitates their spiritual growth. This will be true too in relation to other aspects of their life.

Bishop Jakes successfully addresses questions that impact the life of group members. *Promises From God for Parents* is grounded in the scriptures of the bible and in which are illustrated such concepts as love, forgiveness, despair, anger, healing, patience, happiness and many other relevant issues. These are all areas in which the single parent family

struggles with daily. By understanding that their daily struggles are addressed in the Bible, the bible they believe in and use as a road map for their lives, the single parents will feel empowered while prayerfully making the necessary adjustments to the structure of the family, their relationships, and thus increasing their strength and health.

Bishop Jakes in this book is also practical because he not only deals with the spiritual dilemmas facing parents but he also deals with the everyday functioning issues of finance, hardships, education, and the difficulties and challenges that parents face daily. I believe that the single parent family needs to learn how to strike a balance between the biblical and everyday demand on their lives. The promises revealed in this book will help to facilitate that balance. This book, I believe, brings together relevant biblical support and the intent of the mission statement of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in a way that is expressed in the mission statement itself: to minister to the spiritual, intellectual, physical, emotional, and environmental needs of all people by spreading Christ's liberating gospel through word and deed.

Caring for People God's Way: Another supporting text was a book written by Tim Clinton (2005) and co-authored by Archibald Hart and George Ohlschlager called *Caring for People God's Way*. This is a church based biblical counseling text and was a resource I used as I lead the group. The authors talked about how the person with the smiling face that you see on Sunday morning and the friendly out stretched hand

you shake, could be the very person that is hurting the most. So, it is my belief, that the single parent issues are buried behind the smiles and friendly hand shakes. Society, the church, and the community are at times, more often than not, in patch up mode. Trouble and concerns are only noticed when the family is in crisis and most time we are too late to prevent tragedy. My work, began with this group of single parents, will be proactive instead of reactive in stance as I do my part in trying to rescue the single parent family from further demise. This text supports that concept.

Tim Clinton (p52, 2005) explains that what people need is encouragement because most time our interactions are trivial and shallow. Society, the church, and the community, need to engage persons in meaningful conversations aimed at helping them to come to amiable solutions to their issues and not geared to wanton curiosity and wanting to know the other person's business.

Clinton encourages us to be compassionate and humble listeners. The single parent family finds itself in dire situations most times, through no fault of its own. Healing comes when a person is allowed to tell their stories. We as listeners need not be judgmental but sympathetic and empathetic in order to create the safe environment for the single parent families to unload their deep thoughts, their heavily burdened hearts and minds, at times confused. Unexplained, these can cause discomfort and stress in their relationships. In doing so we will help

them find their place in relationship to God, self, and others. The single parent support group will strive to provide encouragement in its attempt to, create a safe place by being compassionate and humble listeners.

The authors of *Caring for People God's Way* have an excellent chapter on helping people to forgive that will help with the feeling of anger that arises in the single family. The custodial parent is often angry with the absent parent and in some cases, at the children. The children at times may be angry with the absent parent. Child and parent may both be angry with society and the situation that they have found themselves in. Limited finances can be a problem and no support structures are in place. It is my firm belief that the situation of the single parent family cannot be made better until these issues are adequately dealt with. According to Clinton (p.140, 2005), "Scripture and Counseling practice coincide. Some aspects of forgiveness require us to forgive simply because we know it is the right thing for Christians to do. Other aspects of forgiveness require a gradual change in emotions over time." Forgiveness need to be taught as a means to their healing so that the members of the single parent family can move to a better place.

The authors put in place a model called REACH which I intend to use because it helps to get to the bottom of anger whereby healing can begin. REACH stands for:

- R= Recall the hurt
- E= Empathize with the Transgressor

- A =Altruistic Gift for Forgiveness
- C= Commit Publicly
- H=Hold on to Forgiveness when you doubt

Lastly, this supporting text will be used to help deal with the issues surrounding loss. Loss, in the case of the death of a parent, loss of a spouse, and loss of family structures are all losses that invariably can create despair, anger, depression, and tortured attachment patterns.

When Children Grieve: Another component to the single parent support group is the grieving of children. The reaction to loss is experienced differently by children as compared to adults and must be handled differently. The single parent must recognize that a child can react to the divorce and separation of parents, much the same way as the child reacts to the actual death of a parent. *When Children Grieve* (James, 2001) explains that many emotions come into play. Some children may feel burdened to take care of the present parent since the other parent is absent. In many instances, some children feel that they are responsible for the loss and might even feel that their very survival is threatened. This text helps the parents to understand the actions of the children and how best to handle those reactions with minimal upset to the child and the family structure.

Christian Counseling: Single parenting has so many effects due to just being in that situation. Gary Collins author of *Christian Counseling* (1988) has written extensively on the problems. This text has

excellent sections on community and counseling, developmental issues, identity issues, singleness, and family issues. In my research, as mentioned in chapter 1, one of the results of having single parenthood thrust upon you could be loneliness or the fear of never having another relationship. The loss of a sexual partner and the concomitant issues relating to sex outside of marriage can create undue burden on a single parent. Issues of low self esteem, identity, and detachment can arise. Collins, in this book offers good advice which will prove useful with the group.

Internal Family Systems Model: Self psychology theory is a clinical resource that I used in helping the single parent family to understand themselves better because this theory places great importance on individual development. But in order to give more credence to the depth of understanding we are trying to achieve, I used the *Internal Family Systems Model* (Schwartz, 2001). According to Schwartz the self is comprised of many parts and each part reacts and responds differently. For me, using this model with family members, is a source of hope because it allows the person to realize that their emotional situation is not the all encompassing determinant of who they are; rather, there are many parts to the self. The emotions, such as anger and hopelessness that they have are just parts of themselves. With this parts model, the single parent family can deal with each part gradually

learning to recognize the parts and their functioning in relation to the whole self.

Schwartz goes into greater details to explain the parts in terms of the manager and firefighter roles. This is helpful at getting to a deeper understanding of the self. By dealing with the parts separately, a better understanding of the self is achieved and this understanding promotes a healthier self. A healthier self is less likely to become a part of the negative statistics that are usually associated with the single parent family. An improved self merges into a healthier family, the goal of the project.

Integrative Family Therapy: The author has complied a fairly basic model with the understanding of family therapy and systems.

Believing that one can improve on their family dynamics must allow for the flexibility and openness of the family to want to take a look at historical family traits and interactions of pervious relationships. History of ancestors will give understanding to the current family and how it operates. What you came from is the ground from which you evolved. *Integrative Family Therapy* explains the effect of multi-generations on the family. Olsen's book also addresses problem solving, communication and boundaries which are essential to the success of a well rounded family. Olsen (1993) ties in the object relations associated with how well family members handle separation and individuation, concepts which are primary to the support group process. The single parent family needs to

get to the root of the issues that have disturbed their grounding and Olsen method will assist me in helping them to reestablish that basic supportive foundation.

Single-Parent Families – Most books seem to point to the negative effects of single parenting. This book is a collection of articles that were written by different authors. The articles provide a necessary counter-balance to the negative pessimistic characteristics that usually get reported in statistical data. Generalizations like “all single parents’ households give birth to children who commit crime and have daughters who give birth at an early age”, are discounted. The articles in this book talk about the stigmas that are unfairly linked with the single parent family. The authors, in a collection of ten articles, share thoughts and facts that contributed to a more positive appraisal of single parent families. The authors have put together information that is like “a ray of hope” for the single parent family and supportive of their state of affairs. *Single-Parent Families* is a supportive text that serves as a positive reinforcement for the single parent in the support group.

How Families Still Matter: This article discounts many of the myths and negative comments geared toward Generation XERS and their families. While recognizing the challenges facing the family today the authors in their research highlight and promote the positives within these families. They believe that the family remains important and that

values, education, and careers are even emphasized more due to the structure of the family.

CHAPTER THREE

THE EXECUTION OF THE ACTUAL PROJECT

A. Formulation of Group

Having assessed the needs, the importance to ministry, and the theological and clinical principles connected with this single parent support group project, the next step was naturally putting together the group for study.

Working in the congregational community setting through the years, I have been able to observe and work closely with many single parent families that would definitely benefit from the formation of a single parent support group. Although this may not be the best case scenario, it is my belief that persons benefit from these activities much more, easier, and faster when they choose to join on their own. They benefit more when they do not feel pressured or forced into the group but rather out of an expressed desire to become a part of the group because of their own recognizable needs.

I took the decision that all participants in the Single Parent Support group will join on a volunteer basis only. Those who wish to become a part of the group are invited via two venues. The congregation is informed during Sunday morning services when “Concerns of the Community” announcements are made, and in the church’s bulletin under weekly activities of the church. Because I realized that these single parents might struggle with baby sitting issues, the announcements also

indicated that baby sitting services will be provided at no cost to the participants. The announcements were on-going and the meetings were scheduled for every other Saturday at 3pm.

According to Yalom (2005) when a group is formulated the following preliminary issues must be considered. 1) Secure an appropriate meeting place; 2) Make decisions about the structure of therapy; 3) Determine the size of the group; 4) The admission of new members; 5) The frequency of the meetings and the duration of each session.

Following Yalom's methods for the creation of a group the following mechanisms were put in place. A secured place was established with a room that has a door. The structure would allow for one particular topic to be discussed each week unless an urgent matter arose. The group will meet bi-weekly for ninety minutes. The size of the group would not exceed ten members. The admission of new members would only be allowed in the first and second meeting. Yalom would describe this as a closed group (2005, p. 282) with the exception that this single parent support group did not have a predetermined length of time.

Single parents were asked to make a commitment so that group cohesion could take place. The intent from the outset was to develop a safe place where the single parent will not be afraid to tell their stories. If persons were allowed to come and go at will, the homeostasis of the group would be constantly disrupted and the group dynamics would be

put into a tailspin. Consistency among group participants would allow for the building of relationships which would help to create a safe place, which was one of the primary goals of the project.

The approach taken to implement this project would be working with single parents from the St. Luke AME Church congregation who have volunteered to be a part of this group. It was my intention to work with the same persons, the focus group, from beginning to the end.

Although I spent some time studying the issues surrounding single parenting, and I consider myself as being well aware of what the wider society and statistics have deemed to be the inherent problems of the single parent family, I believed that the best way to understand the issues of single parenting was to go directly to the source. The source in this case was the single parents themselves. Therefore, group dynamics would determine how the single parent group unfolds. In other words, then, as topics of concern arose, these will be the issues that get dealt with in subsequent group meetings and these would get intertwined with the theological and clinical principles that informed my thinking and *modus operandi*, vis-à-vis understanding and working with single parents.

The method of group engagement was evident and articulated from the start, at the first meeting. At the first meeting, an explanation of the purpose of group was given as well as a brief history of how we got to this place was also given. Some of the concerns that are expressed

about single parenting were also engaged. Even though these pieces of information were shared with the group, it would have been clearly stated that the focus of this single parent support group was to address the members of the group's own single parenting issues which may or may not be the same as those indicated by the statistics.

I understood that persons may be apprehensive about telling their stories. So, as group facilitator, it was my intention to explain that this single parent group would provide benefits for the overall health of their families. The benefits would derive from the gathering of persons who are experiencing similar situations. The benefits would come from the collective sharing of ideas, resources, and stories. It was my hope that, if the members felt at ease and comfortable, this will make for better unscripted results.

One subject that will take on extreme importance in establishing a safe place would be confidentiality. Each person would need to understand, and it will be pointedly emphasized, that the group will not become the intended safe place for all participants if each one of the members of the group did respect the privacy and the very sensitive nature of the sharing in the group meetings. The structure of the group will be described and any issues or concerns on the part of the group members would be addressed. The structure, although fluid, will have the parents meet separately from the children so that they, the parents are able to express their feelings freely and openly. Additionally, it would

be pointed out that there will be times when the entire family meet together as part of the group process. This will happen at least once so that the opinions, concerns, and issues of the children get listened to.

The first meeting is highly important because from this meeting we will learn what are the particular needs and concerns of the single parent. Each parent will be asked to explain why they decided to participate in this group, their own parental concerns, and what they expect to get out of this group.

From my research, I have established a list of issues that are frequently the concerns of single parents and I surmise may come up in the group. However, I will remain open to other topics and concerns that may arise (See exhibit B). Once an issue arises, we will discuss the issue in relation to the religious and clinical principles already presented in section two of this project write-up. Only after this is done will we as a group consider how we can manipulate the issue for the betterment of the family unit. For instance, let's take a look at one of the more common issues, anger, that could surface and hinders a family from moving to a better place.

Anger is a feeling. It is a feeling of hurt, displeasure, mistreatment, misunderstanding or opposition. When emotion is directed inward it is fear. When emotion is directed outward it is anger. The initial approach is to acknowledge that they have recognized that there are issues of anger within themselves, their children and the family structure. The

acknowledgement is a step toward healing. Acknowledging that others do not control our anger, but the one experiencing the anger does, is an important lesson to learn. Next the parent needs to know that anger is something that happens to all of us and we must learn to handle it appropriately. Aristotle said anger is the energy that enables us to face difficulty.

The family must be aware of the anger that may exist between non-custodial and the custodial parent and the child. I would also discuss with them that the anger that the parent shows can be detected by children and that children also can experience anger. Children behave in the same ways they see their parents acting. The anger that the child is expressing can be carried over into their school work, their behavior at home, and behavior in school. The discussion of anger with the single parent group would revolve around the effects of anger on the physical and mental health of each individual. Anger also has a way of creating uneasiness within the family structure.

Having acknowledged the anger and its effects, we will seek to come up with supportive ways to manage our anger and to channel the energy from anger so that it works for us rather than against us. For instance, if we learned that our anger came from the frustration of not having any time for oneself, we will explore time management. How can the single parent reschedule their lives so that the parent has some “me” time? We may look at sharing baby sitting responsibilities on a rotation basis. Say

for instance, every third Saturday a parent watches the children of another group member and then on the second Friday the responsibility is reversed; we would have facilitated each other. If the anger comes from the lack of finances, we will explore issues around say budgeting. In an effort to support each other, we will try to help the family look at the differences between wants and needs. If the anger comes from feeling as if you don't have enough time because the single parent has to parent for two persons (they have to do it all), we will try to help the parent put priorities in place recognizing that he/she is only one person and it is "ok" not to do it all but to do what he/she really can. In object relations circles, we are told that we are not expected to be perfect parents; rather the expectation is to be good enough parents. This can really take a load off the shoulders of a single parent.

If the child is facing anger because of the absence of the other parent, we might point out that maybe that child might benefit from some professional counseling. The group might even advise the parent to get the child into no cost or low cost extra curricula activities. The single parent support group will help the parents find the activities. The parent will also be encouraged to keep the lines of communication open.

With this particular topic, anger, I have developed a game that I call **I Choose**. I needed to tap into something that would allow the parents to begin to release that anger and move toward healing for themselves and their family. Reading an article written by Stephen

Nachmanovitch, *Free Play* was the perfect solution. Nachmanovitch talks about how the educational institutions suppress and constrain the inner creative activities and do not allow children free rein for the development of their creative inner being. Therefore, our children are in a sense clones, with information poured into them and their creativity stifled. As the author stated, their wings are clipped and they are molded into predictable members of society. The idea of free play was fascinating to me because it had no constraints on the way in which I could work with my focus group, the parent and the child.

With this game, I tried to envision something that would fascinate and provoke thought. Balloons! Colorful Balloons! Colors have physiological effect on people. It has been shown that colors influence our emotions. Colors sway our actions. Colors can affect the way we respond to people, things, and ideas. Commercial advertisers have been acting on this piece of knowledge for decades if not centuries. Many people believe that colors have a powerful effect on our daily lives. Hence my insight into using colors in this presentation.

In the game, I used one of the breathing exercise techniques that I learned from a class I had taken on “The Introductions of the Spiritual Life & the Creative Life”. In participating in this activity I noticed a change within myself. In my dealings with the single parent support group I felt that this would be an excellent experience for the group, hence the game.

The purpose of **I Choose** would be to get the parents to know themselves just a little bit better, via Self Psychology and be able to deal with the issues which hinder or develop their overall functioning as a single parent. Twyla Tharp (2003, p.47) said “the better you know yourself, the more you will know when you are playing to your strengths and when you are sticking your neck out. Venturing out of your comfort zone may be dangerous, yet you do it anyway because our ability to grow is directly proportional to an ability to entertain the uncomfortable.” This is one of the goals I desire to achieve for my Single Parent Support Group that they are able to know themselves better and past the same techniques of knowing thyself to their children. Therefore the creation of this presentation that I call “**I Choose**”. I want the single parents to know that it is their decision to go beyond the negative statistics that are quoted about single parents.

The presentation materials used are three small colored shopping bags. The colors were red, a blue striped bag and a yellow bag. In each bag were corresponding colored balloons. Each bag was tagged with the meaning of the color which would only be displayed at an appropriate time. The red bag was labeled severe anger, the blue striped bag was labeled ambivalence anger and the yellow bag was mild anger. Also used were white unlined papers. The colors where chosen as follows:

- Red – Evokes strong emotions including anger
- Blue – Feelings of sadness

- Yellow – Claiming cheerful
- White – Purity and cleanliness

The presentation goes as follows:

1. Each person was asked to think about some type of anger that they were still dealing with.
2. Each individual would now look at the bag and try to relate that anger with the color.
3. Once a color was chosen the color was explained to them.
4. Participants were then asked to reach inside and pull out one of the items inside (the balloons).
5. They were asked to think about the anger and try to displace the anger from within themselves into the balloons. Each breath into the balloon would release the anger from them into the balloon until finally all the anger was in the balloon.
6. Now they have two choices, (1) to hold on to the balloon, tie it and keep it or (2) let the balloon go and image as if the balloon sailing through the air was all the anger from within them that was now in the balloon being released into the universe for God to handle.

7. They would now be asked to write on the white paper their experiences of the exercise.

At the end of the game a discussion is held on what feelings were developed within. In conjunction with this game I will use the REACH approach developed by Tim Clinton discussed in chapter 2. This REACH model helps a person achieve emotional forgiveness thereby moving to a place of healing. Once a person begins to heal, she/he will look at her/his single parent situation differently. Looking at their situation from the vantage point of healing, brings a positive approach to the way in which they will proceed in their relationship with others, their children, and society.

The parents will also be instructed to think about this exercise in the following week and bring their thoughts. Parents are invited to take extra balloons home to try in private or with their children. The game, and afterward the discussion, will allow the parents to dig deeper into themselves for the anger that was hindering a healthier self. Once the obstacle was found that had created the anger, the parent was directed to put something positive in its place, something that would promote growth toward a better self.

Richard Schwartz, *Internal Family System*, discussed in detailed in chapter two of this project, the concept of the parts. That concept will be used as a healing mechanism to show the family that it is not the entire self that is angry but only a part of the self is angry. Each parent will be

asked to look at themselves and realize that only a part of themselves is experiencing the emotion of anger; the other parts are experiencing a different emotion. By looking at oneself in this way will help the parent look at the whole self as a better person.

The group will talk about the biblical approach to anger. It will be shown that the biblical text addresses the issue of anger. Even Jesus got angry (John 2:15) and turned over the tables of the money changers. But Jesus was also forgiving and directs us to do the same as it is stated in Mathew 6:14 "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." Because we are Christians and believe in the teaching of Jesus Christ, we understand that it will be the right thing to do: to forgive those with whom we may be angry.

The group's discussion will point to the fact that dealing with anger makes for a healthier family. The wearing off effect of anger allows for improvement in the child's behavior. The healthier family is less likely to be done in by stress and anxiety. The healthier family is less likely to become a victim of the negative statistics associated with studies of the single parent family.

The method, steps, and approaches that were discussed in relation to the handling of anger, will be the same methodological approach that utilized in addressing the other issues that arise in the single parent group, with the exception of the **I Choose** game which was created specially to use with anger issues. It must be noted that the particular

religious principle or principles that will be accessed will depend on the topic that comes up during the group sessions. The same will be true for the clinical principles. The clinical principles that will be applied to each topic will depend on the topic itself, but all principles will be derived from the guiding theories discussed and laid out in chapter 2. To go through each step for all the issues of concern noted in Exhibit B is too numerous for this project; suffice it to say that the method of engagement will be the same.

Additionally, because this project is geared to support for the single parent family, other resources and approaches will be used to connect with and support the group process. It will be the goal of this project, to not only discuss issues that may arise from the group, but also to incorporate activities that facilitate an all around healthier single parent family. The single parent family will experience support through its understanding of the single parent structure, supportive scripture, and developing a resource list which includes supportive songs. The single parent family will be encouraged to keep an ongoing list that they can share and refer back to whenever the need arises in order to find supportive scriptures, resources, and supportive songs.

The steps taken in understanding the family structure are important in developing a healthier family. The project seeks to help the entire family to come to the knowledge that they are not alone. The project seeks to reinforce that the church is there for them, as is

demonstrated by the establishment of this single parent support group. Discussions around the single parent family structure will be held so that the parents will understand the dynamics of their own single parent structure. It is vital that each family respect the autonomy of the other. Each member of the single parent family will be helped to recognize that each person may respond differently to this new family dynamic and to understand that the lines of communication will remain open always.

Family secrets should not be allowed in the family because they cloud the avenues of communications, and when the truth does come out, it usually creates more dissensions and hurts. Family secrets can divide any family. The single parent will be taught that honesty is really the best approach. Secrets help create false relationships. Secrets distort perceptions. Secrets weaken the emotional structure of the family and at times when the strength of the single parent family is of uttermost necessity for the survival of the single family.

For instance, telling a child that the non-custodial parent is no where to be found when all the time you knew exactly where the parent is, and that you might be keeping the child away from the non custodial parent for whatever reason. This surely could cause problems at the time and/or in the future. The intent is to help each family member see how the relationship between the parent and child, child and parent, parent and the wider society, and the wider society and the parent unfolds and how relationships influence development and interactions

within the family. Helping the single parent family to recognize and understand these matters, through group discussion, will help the family to see the negatives objects in the hope of possibly preventing the negative consequences being visited on the family. The family will also see the positives in open honest relationships. Being able to learn from these insights will propel the single parent family to an overall healthy family.

While understanding the family structure, the single parent will seek to develop expanded relationships across generations as a supplementary means of support. This will involve bringing other family members in as parent-like figures (Bengtson, 2000). In the absence of a father an uncle can be used as a source and in the absence of a mother an aunt can be used to develop a relationship with a child and hence provide added support for the entire family. Grandparents are also very important to establishing stronger ties with the family and as a means of support for both parent and child. In most cases, the Grandparents love doing it. According to Bengtson (2000) this is something that historically the African American family has done as a byproduct of slavery, through segregation and employment discrimination as well as when racism is made manifest. The African American Family has always shown resilience in caring and providing for the family in difficult times and under dire conditions. The single parent will be shown how to draw from the strength of the extended family system.

A part of the mission of the African Methodist Episcopal Church directs us to minister to the spiritual need of all people (see exhibit A). The method, steps, and approach followed to accomplish this can work in the setting up of a supporting scripture list. Considering the entire 66 books of the Holy Bible, no scripture when read, speaks to the person the same way. It is the intention to have each person in the group bring in scriptures from time to time that have been an encouragement to them and gotten them through various situations in their lives. Each scripture will be explained by the single parent presenting it in relation to the situation as it is put at the disposal of others.

Single parents will be encouraged to draw from the strength within. The group strives to inspire confidence and to lift the self esteem of the single family, helping them to realize that they can do things for themselves. To that end, the single parent family will be encouraged to develop a resource list. The resource list will be about places to which they can turn for help with their children, finances, and overall family issues. They will be encouraged to go to the library, surf the internet, and read books that they believe will help them and their families. The group will go over the list and discuss what can be beneficial to them and ways of accessing the resources will be developed. There is an old proverb that says "Buy a man a fish, he can eat for a day, teach him how to fish and he can eat for a life time." It is the intention of this project to teach. It is the intention to support the single parent family by showing

them how to make positive improvements in their situation themselves and to reach beyond the negative statistics by taking one step at a time to improve themselves no matter what the issue they might face.

Songs have been a source of support and encouragement in the African American cultural experience since the times of slavery. During slavery, and even today, songs carry potent messages. Gospel spirituals have inspired, comforted, and encouraged many of us for years. Even today, songs and music still bring comfort. The single parent support group will be encouraged to develop a list of encouraging songs from which they can draw strength.

All of the above are the specific combinations of methods, steps and approaches that will be used in this project to inspire support and make a lasting difference in the lives of the single parent family.

B. Assessing Outcomes

When the times come to assess the project I will be looking to see if the needs that I had identified in chapter one were actually the needs of the focus group. If they were the needs of the focus group, I would want to know whether or not the project met those needs.

The first thing that I will do is to develop a questionnaire (See exhibit C). The questionnaire is meant to assess the needs of the members of the single parent group at the beginning of the project and will be handed out at the first meeting. The answers to those questions will allow me to determine what activities are feasible that can be carried

out during the course of this project and what the specific needs are that the members of the group were seeking to have satisfied. Based on previous counseling relationships with congregants, I know that this list could get to be exhaustive. As a result, it is my intention to limit the activities to three.

In facilitating the group, I will draw on skills learned from *Inside Out and Outside In*, *Internal Family System Model* and *Integrative Family Therapy Model*. I will also draw on techniques learned in actual group at Post Graduate center to facilitate this group.

Half way into the project I will do an interim assessment. The interim assessment will allow me to evaluate the project to make any changes if need be (See exhibit D). I will be looking for things that need changing, things that should be thrown out all together or things that can remain as is. The interim assessment, I believe, will allow for a better overall project.

At the end of this project I will meet with each individual to determine whether the sessions have made a difference in the way he/she views himself/herself as single parents. Part of the assessment will be determining if topics discussed were helpful to them. If so, why? If not, why not? I will also be looking to see whether or not there were any ideas around implementation that might help future group experience. I will want to know whether or not suggestions from group

members were put in place or acted upon and how these either worked or not.

To evaluate the results of all activities and the overall project, at the end of my study, I will give the participants an evaluation form (Exhibit E). The evaluation form will have a scale from 1-4, 4 being the most positive result and 1 the less. In compiling the data, I would be in a better position to determine the future of the project. Should it continue, I will need to know what improvements or adjustments should be made.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

The focus group started meeting under the guidelines as prescribed by Yalom (2005). The group was permitted to evolve on its own. Each parent was encouraged to speak and explain why they had come and what they were expecting from their participation in such a forum as this. The first meeting was overwhelming and was extremely emotional for me and the participants. One parent expressed her gratefulness for the group, to put it in her words, "I can't believe the place where I worship has finally recognized that there is a need for single parent support. I know there must be a God somewhere." Another single parent, a father, was elated to know that there was a place where he could finally get some help, insight, and understanding in the rearing of his daughter. Upon listening to others speak, parents were relieved, to put it mildly, to realize that they were not alone in their struggles as single parents. The single parents welcomed the group because they could talk to adults who had similar experiences and concerns.

It appeared as if a dam had exploded, gushing forth with each parent finally releasing thoughts and emotions that had been buried so deep within. As each single parent spoke, you could sense their increasing ability to tell their stories was both invigorating and

revitalizing to them, if only for those minutes in which they spoke. You could see on their faces the relief as they unloaded their family issues and concerns, and then realizing that there may be light at the end of the tunnel, even if it were but a glimmer of hope.

It seemed to me, that at the end of each parent's story was a statement like, "I pray this is not the last time we do this". Based on my observations and research, I had only speculated about the need for a single parent support group like this one. After listening to the single parents unloading and seemingly to exhale and breathe at the thought of being heard and the possibility of some type of resolution, at the first meeting, I knew without a doubt that God had placed this project in my spirit. I felt affirmed that I had been obedient to the scripture as recorded in John 21:16. Jesus said "take care of my sheep".

A major concern that continually informed my execution of this project was the need to create and maintain a safe place where the single parents could feel comfortable when discussing their personally private issues. Based on the methods earlier discussed for facilitating the group, the final individual evaluative interviews, responses to the interim assessment questionnaire, and the final group evaluation questionnaire, I am convinced that the goal of creating a safe place was realized. According to Yalom (2005, page 55), "a cohesive group feels warmth and comfort and a sense of belonging: they value the group and feel in turn that they are valued, accepted, and supported by the members." Yalom

said that this type of group has a higher rate of attendance and participation. Yalom's statements were true in the case of this project group because out of a group of 8, 6 parents who were always present, during each group session, there was never, not even at the beginning stage, a need to prod or cajole the parents to participate in discussions or to release to the group their parental struggles. Because of the early development of trust and faith between fellow group members, over the course of the project, the single parent support group became a safer place.

Asking the single parent to provide supportive scriptures (See Exhibit F), was invaluable to their putting into play their religion as experienced and that each parent practiced. It was priceless in letting the parents know that they could draw from the resources at hand, the scriptures. The scriptures permitted them to know that they could draw from their own beliefs as means of support for themselves, their families and for this group. Each parent was allowed to express her/his interpretation and what the scriptures meant to them. That was quite a pastoral experience because the parents discussed scriptures they had never thought of before and received new meaning from familiar scriptures. The single parents were encouraged to add to the list as a means of ongoing spiritual support and under-girding and to share these with their families. The continued to do this.

The same method of support was put in place for the inspirational supportive songs. What I did find was that even though these scriptures were read daily and these inspirational songs were listened to frequently most in the group never thought to apply them directly to their single parent situations or use them as motivational and encouragement tools. The parents were now appreciative of the fact that they had at their finger tips a no cost means of support that could be applied to the entire family.

Communication was an issue that each family felt they could improve. The parents agreed that anger was a major issue for the entire family. The **I Choose** game and the **REACH** approach were approaches that not only helped them to deal with specific family issues like anger, but helped them to move on to have better communication with all persons involved with them in relationship: themselves, the non-custodial parent, their children, and society. The single parents admitted that most times when issues arose in the family, the parent dictated the outcome. This happened because most times they were too tired to deal with the problem at that moment. After discussing how being a dictator was not helpful to a creating a healthy family, and that the child's opinion did matter regardless of what the final decision made by the parent. The parents agreed that having tried better communication approaches that the tension in the home was a little less. The single parents reported that their children felt valued and respected

that their opinions were heard. Most parents agreed and even thought that for a long time, they previously felt stuck in dictator mode.

As an approach to breaking the ice for communication, a bowling trip was organized and was greatly enjoyed by all. Family activities were a goal of this project to promote a healthier single parent family and bring the family closer together. The families discussed doing outside activities that would incur little or no cost.

New modes of communication led to understanding the family structure, the relationship, and their effect on the family. The single parents admitted that they had never thought to look at the family structure nor interactions because they were just trying to survive each day. By discussing the family structure and how each relationship affects the functioning of each family member, the single parents began to look at their households differently, and began to realize how the effects of family relationships could be responsible for some of their concerns, both inside and outside of the family. This was an awakening moment and it led to developing healthier family structures and these on firmer foundations. Parents started to pay attention to the effects that the family member's interactions were having on their family.

I can do it all. I have to do it all. I am all alone. These were the sentiments expressed by all the single parents initially. Part of the focus of this single parent support group was to reassure the single parent that they need not be so hard on themselves. The single parent support group

reminded them of the historical family ties that had existed throughout their culture. Most single parents agreed that they had not sought across generations help and support because they were convinced they could do it all. It was not because they did not believe their families would help it was their pride that stood in the way. At this point, some Self Psychology concepts were introduced.

After coming to terms with their inner self and realizing that it was not shameful to seek help, and that contrary to their own thoughts that they were not “super parents”. In the next few group sessions, some parents actually reported that they had started the process of asking for help from family members, close friends, and godparents. Seeking help was easier than they had thought and had actually freed up blocs of time in their schedules to have “selfish pursuits”. The parents even reported that the children seem to be enjoying developing these other relationships.

In my original proposal I did not anticipate that any one person would try to dominate the group sessions by trying to always gear group discussions to their issues alone. I guess I felt that this being a spiritually based group, that all participants where there to be supportive of each other. I neglected to involve in the group process initially the room for what Yalom called “those who struggle for position in hierarchy of dominance” (2005, p.153).

Although I had noticed that this one person was trying to govern the flow of the sessions, I had chosen to gracefully try to handle it by trying to shorten the person's interruptions of others and shorten their comments. But when I read the comments from the interim assessment questionnaire that each participant was requested to complete as a means of assessing the single parent group I realized, reluctantly, I might add, that I had to address the issue in group. Things seem to be going so well and I did not want to damage the flow. Several single parents commented that the group would be better and improved if all parents were allowed equal opportunity of participation. They stated that they had observed the members who seemed as if they always wanted to dominate the conversations and always wanted to manipulate the solutions, comments, and resources toward themselves and their family. I realized that I had to bring the situation to the group or it would affect the stability and the credibility of the group process since some members were feeling that they were not being heard.

After bringing the matter to the group and stating that the single parent support group was established to be a supportive environment for all parents, the situation improved somewhat. I asked the group to respond in reference to my statement. Some did and some didn't. After bringing up the situation to the group, some of the single parents who were not so vocal began to speak up. Any one person who tried to dominate the group process, was spoken to afterwards and was reminded

that this is group support. As a result of the “dominating” situation, I informed the group that individual sessions could be arranged in addition to the final individualized session that was already established. Some of the single parents opted for the one-on-one which proved beneficial to them. Those that selected the one-on-one, I noticed a difference in their self-esteem, attitude, and willingness not to be a part of negatives statistics and a desire to be helpful not only to themselves but to the overall group. In the one-on-one, it was easier to direct the person to professional help where this was necessary. The single parents were more open to discuss their family issues and aggressively wanted to find solutions when they would return to the single parent group’s next session.

Some of members of the group expressed a desire to know more about some of the specific clinical approaches I had mentioned in some sessions. Although I was quite surprised, the interest in the subject now allowed me some additional latitude in how I would direct the group. Prior to the expressed interest, I always wondered about how I may suggest professional counseling to group members since, historically at least, the notion of seeing a professional counselor was a self inflicted stigma for African Americans. Since the group raised the subject I felt less constrained and from that point on, in group, I would cautiously indicate where I thought professional counseling would be helpful.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

A. Implication of results

This project has truly been enlightening and a pleasure to see the single parents beginning to take additional control over their lives and the circumstances impacting them. I had anticipated that there would be some operational changes but not to the extent that I saw evolving within the group. They were like babies learning new things and eager to try them out too.

Contrary to the negative statistics that we discussed, these parents recognized that what was being said about them and their children were not the way they saw their own situations, so much so, that they were eager to participate in the group. Parents started looking at their situations differently, realizing the effect of the entire picture as to how and why they had found themselves in the position of being a single parent. Also, included in the picture was society and the way society in most cases impacted their lives negatively.

This project not only sought to reinforce and build the self-esteem of the single parent family but also to provide direction on how to go about seeking and developing resources for sustained change. It was truly a blessing when parent realized that they themselves were resources for each other. One parent worked for the IRS and was able to arrange for an IRS agent to come in and talk to the group. This

invitation was also extended to the entire congregation. The single parent support group received the credit. The group was so proud of themselves to say “look at what we did”. This was an enormous boost to their self-esteem and an overall pat on the back for the entire single parent support group.

Eagerly, and with much enthusiasm, they shared on issues of co-parenting, and raising their children on their own, and the impact this was having on their children and their own lives. They spoke about the reluctance to seek outside help because governmental facilities that were supposed to help looked down on them and assumed they were just lazy. I did not expect nor could I have predicted the depth of emotions and feelings that would surface as a result of having these single parent support group sessions. I did realize that voicing these emotions was moving the families to a better place in their relationships which was a goal of this project.

Additionally, as support for each other, they have connected with one person in the group they can call at any time when they really need to talk to someone. From this connection they had birth a once a month sitting service. Once a month, a parent will volunteer to watch the children for 3 hours while the other parents do something for themselves. On a rotation basis for the 8 parents that require a parent over an eight month period to be responsible for one three hour sitting service and 21 free hours to yourself at no financial cost to anyone.

Some of the women in the group volunteered to help the single father with his daughter and he in turn volunteered to help the mothers with their sons. As the inner strengths came out, you could see that the parents were growing.

I did not realize profound impact that the group would have on our congregation. The congregation was pleased that this single parent support group was established. Many non group congregants voiced that they would be praying for the single parents support group and expressed a desire to help in any way they could.

I also did anticipate the parents in the group telling others about the positive outcome of the group experience and how beneficial the sessions were. They were chatting about the benefits derived from the group sessions for themselves and their children and many other persons in the congregation sought to join. Unfortunately, at the time, I could not allow in new members because of the trust issue and also because I felt that the dynamics of this group had already been established and I did not want to disturb their foundation. I did take the names and advised them that I would notify them when the next group would start.

In putting together this project, I had anticipated that I would draw members from the full range of ages. Unfortunately this did not happen. No one from the 18-35 age group of single parents showed any interest, although I know that they exist in the congregation. What I did come to

understand was that those who did come to the group were living on their own while most of the 18-35 year olds were living with parents or grandparents. It is my belief that their living circumstances had a lot to do with whether or not they would join the group. Subsequently they might not have felt that the parent support group would be helpful to them. I do not believe that this is the case and so I am brainstorming now about how I might be able to get them involved the next time.

B. Contribution to Clarify and Expanding

The project sought to reinforce the African Methodist Church's Mission statement. Countless times in religious institutions, we have principles and doctrines that are in place to increase the functionality of our communities on both administrative and spiritual levels. Yet those principles fall by the wayside. The documents only become principles and doctrines that we know on paper only but rarely put into action. This project aspired to put these principles into action so that the single parent family could actually feel and experience hope. The project aspired to make the single parent family reap the benefits both emotionally and physically from the mission statement that they are taught to believe in from the moment they become members of the church.

The bible teaches us in 1st Corinthians 13 that we are to love unconditionally, without prejudice, discrimination or bigotry toward anyone. But this has not been the case vis-à-vis the single parent. I

personally witnessed many members of the church community and persons in the society at large as well as those who wrote negatively about the single parent situations with no reference to hope. It was my desire, that through this project, I would help to change those feelings in relation to those parents, one parent, one child, and one household at a time.

I hold the view that as believers in God, we need to not only read the word of God but we must put it into action, thus becoming doers of the word as well. This project sought to be a doer of the word of God by showing love and physically working with the single parent family to move them to better places in their own eyes and the eyes of society. Henceforth, with every scripture that they studied, every song that arisen from their hearts, and/or situations, every prayer we prayed, every story and resource we discovered together, the single parent family became stronger, healthier, and less likely to become a part of the reported negative statistics.

The clinical principles that shaped this project helped the parents to expand beyond their own imagination to see in reality what were impacting their single parent families. Those principles discussed in this project helped the parents to understand how and why they were in the situations in which they found themselves. Understanding the how and the why, the clinical principles made coping possible and easier.

Recognizing that interactions in relationships play major roles in the functioning of the family was a key discovery for the parents.

Using principles espoused by self psychology, for instance, was vital to their understanding of themselves as well as their children and others who influenced the family. Developing deeper understandings of the self enabled them to move away from seeing themselves as what society deemed as the negatively false image of destitute individuals. The single parent families worked hard to reshuffle and to be aware of personalities and influences relating to themselves and their children. Many times these unveilings came with hurt, pain, and tears. The single parents were determined to create positive images that reinforced a life lived out in a positive light. They would show the world that they would not be falsely imprisoned by the images others had built for them but would strive to be seen for who they really were: single parents families seeking to do the best they could in the face of numerous disadvantages working against them. The parents realized that they had inner strengths which they would call on in their attempts to create enhanced but real self-esteem for themselves, their children, and each other in the group. As the saying goes: they were becoming their brothers' keepers.

C. Contribution In A Wider Context

An aspect of the theology in the African Methodist Episcopal Church is expressed in the mission statement (see exhibit A), teaches us

that we much teach to others what we have learned and spread what we have learned to others throughout the world. In other words, one learns and then that one teaches and the cycle gets repeated over and over again. The single parents in this group have learned how to draw on and apply scriptures, songs, clinical principles, inner strengths, and other support mechanisms, to help them identify problems that adversely affect and afflict the integrity of their family structures.

What has been most positive about their accomplishments here has been that they were not afraid to share themselves with others, so much so, that even within the church, members have been complimenting them on the noticeable changes in the self-esteem of the parents and the children. Other single parents who were not a part of the initial group, began to seek out information about the group's meeting time and proactively expressing a desire to join. As the bible talks about our spreading the good news, so it is with the good news coming from these single parents.

Each person who spreads the positive influence the group process has had on them, is doing ministry. Each child who tells another child about how their parents are listening to them or tells their friends that they went bowling with their parents for the first time and believe that it is the result of the single parent support group, is doing ministry. Each child and parent who tells someone that they will not become victim to their circumstances, is doing ministry. Each child who tells another child

at their school or the parent who tells another parent outside of the immediate church community, and before you know it, the word has spread and many persons have been ministered to with the hope that they can make positive changes in their own households.

This project is a demonstration of the ministry of spreading the good news and following the words of Jesus to feed his sheep. It is all about giving the single parent family what they need to survive. The project sought to change one family at a time and having seen tangible changes in the lives of those who attended the group sessions, I believe that the mission is well on the way to being accomplished.

D. Implications For Future Ministry

I am so humbled, excited, and energized about the things that happened in this project. Without a doubt, the project will lose the name single parent support group and become for me a single parent ministry. Given the depth of need for this ministry type, I feel we only scratched the surface and there is work to be accomplished and finished in the lives of those who participated in the project. Not only have I recognized the need to continue this work, but so have the parents: they made that request of themselves. There is still work to be done. Many families, I feel, within my own church community, would benefit from this type of support.

Within my local district in Manhattan where there are sixteen congregations, it is my goal to approach these churches and help them develop a viable ministry to single parents. It is my aim, to pool the resources of all the congregations together, so that all single parent families in these churches could reap the benefits of joint resources. One of the goals of this effort will be to establish a counseling center to serve the needs of the Manhattan district of congregations.

This ministry has only just begun and it is yet to be seen what God has in store as to the future of this type of ministry. I put myself in God's hand and will allow God to direct His will for this ministry for humankind, God's people.

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Exhibit A

THE MISSION OF THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Mission of the African Methodist Episcopal Church is to minister to the spiritual, intellectual, physical and emotional, and environmental needs of all people by spreading Christ's liberating gospel through word and deed. At every level of the Connection and in every local church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church shall engage in carrying out the spirit of the original Free African Society, out of which the A.M.E. Church evolved: that is, to seek out and save the lost, and serve the needy through a continuing program of (1) preaching the gospel, (2) feeding the hungry, (3) clothing the naked, (4) housing the homeless, (5) cheering the fallen, (6) providing jobs for the jobless, (7) administering to the needs of those in prisons, hospitals, nursing homes, asylums and mental institutions, senior citizens' homes, caring for the sick, the shut-in, the mentally and socially disturbed, and (8) encouraging thrift and economic advancement. St. Luke's individual mission of being "A Ministry of Teaching, Reaching and Preaching" complies with the overall mission of the A.M.E. Church.

Exhibit B
Issues of Concern

Abandonment
Abuse
Alienation
Anger
Anxiety
Behavior
Belonging
Blame
Boundaries
Child Support
Chores
Conflict
Co-Parenting
Depression
Divorce
Fear
Finances
Grief
Guilt
Identification
Loneliness
Rage
Relationship
Single parenting
Stress
Substance Abuse

Exhibit C

1. Do you feel this is a ministry that is needed?

Yes _____ NO _____

If yes briefly explain.

2. Is the your being a single parent the results of:

(1) Your choice _____

(2) Divorce _____

(3) Death _____

(4) Other _____ Please briefly explain:

3. Do you feel like you are being punished?

Yes _____ No _____

If yes briefly explain?

4. How many children do you have?

Boys _____ Ages of each _____

Girls _____ Ages of each _____

5. What types of resources do you feel would be helpful for you?

List three

(1) _____

(2) _____

(3) _____

6. Have you seen areas of misery, anguish, pain or distress in your children that you believe are results a single parent household? If so please list three.

(1) _____

(2) _____

(3) _____

7. What resources would you like to see for your children?

(1) _____

(2) _____

(3) _____

8. What resources would you like to see for yourself?

(1) _____

(2) _____

(3) _____

Exhibit D

Interim Assessment

1. Are you pleased with the Single Parent Support Group?

Yes _____ No _____

2. Do you think this is a much over due group?

Yes _____ No _____

3. Has the meeting been helpful to you?

Yes _____ No _____

Why _____

—

4. Are you willing to continue meeting?

Yes _____ No _____

5. What more would you like to see?

-
-
-
-
-
-
-

Comments

Exhibit E

Please rate your answers based on the following scale:

Scale: Excellently (Yes) = 4 Very Good = 3

Good (Maybe) = 2

Not at all (No) = 1

- 1. Where these sessions helpful for you? _____**
- 2. Where these sessions helpful for your children? _____**
- 3. Where these sessions helpful for your overall family? _____**
- 4. If you had feelings of being punished or of suffering do feel they are somewhat lessen now? _____**
- 5. Do you feel your issues/concerns were starting to be addressed in this setting? _____**
- 6. Would you like to participate in on-going sessions? _____**
- 7. Have you implemented any ideas that developed from these session? Yes _____ NO _____ If yes please explain.**

Comments/ Suggestions:

Exhibit F

Supporting Scriptures

Psalm 12:7

O Lord, you will keep us safe and protect us from such people forever.

Psalm 48

1.Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God, his holy mountain.**2.**It is beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth. Like the utmost heights of Zaphon is Mount Zion, the city of the Great King.**3.**God is in her citadels; he has shown himself to be her fortress.**4.**When the kings joined forces, when they advanced together,**5.**they saw [her] and were astounded; they fled in terror.**6.**Trembling seized them there, pain like that of a woman in labor.**7.**You destroyed them like ships of Tarshish shattered by an east wind.**8.**As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD Almighty, in the city of our God: God makes her secure forever "Selah"**9.**Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love.**10.**Like your name, O God, your praise reaches to the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with righteousness.**11.**Mount Zion rejoices, the villages of Judah are glad because of your judgments.**12.**Walk about Zion, go around her, count her towers,**13.**consider well her ramparts, view her citadels, that you may tell of them to the next generation.**14.**For this God is our God for ever, and ever; he will be our guide even to the end

Psalm 121

1.I lift up my eyes to the hills-- where does my help come from?**2.**My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.**3.**He will not let your foot slip-- he who watches over you will not slumber;**4.**indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.**5.**The LORD watches over you-- the LORD is your shade at your right hand;**6.**the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.**7.**The LORD will keep you from all harm-- he will watch over your life;**8.**the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

Psalm 122

1.I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."**2.**Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem.**3.**Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together.**4.**That is where the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to praise the name of the LORD according to the statute given to Israel.**5.**There the thrones for judgment stand, the thrones of the house of David.**6.**Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May those who love you be secure**7**May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels"**8.**For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will say, "Peace be within you."**9.**For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your prosperity.

Psalm 139

1. Lord, you have searched me and you know me.**2.**You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.**3.**You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.**4.**Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely Lord.**5.**You hem me in--behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me.**6.**Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.**7.**Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?**8.**If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.**9.**If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,**10.**even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.**11.**If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,"**12.**even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.**13.**For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.**14.**I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.**15.**My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,**16.**your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.**17.**How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!**18.**Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you.**19.**If only you would slay the wicked, O God! Away from me, you bloodthirsty men! **20.**They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. **21.**Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord, and abhor those who rise up against you?**22.**I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.**23.**Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.**24.**See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Ecclesiastes 7:12

Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor

Matthew 17:20

He replied, "Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.

Ephesians 3:20

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us,

Philippians 4:13

I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

1 John 4:4.

You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.