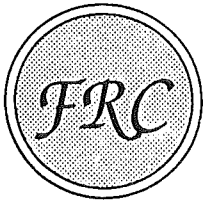


PASTORAL CARE NEWSLETTER



PUBLISHED BY THE FAMILY RELATIONS COMMITTEE
OF PHILADELPHIA YEARLY MEETING

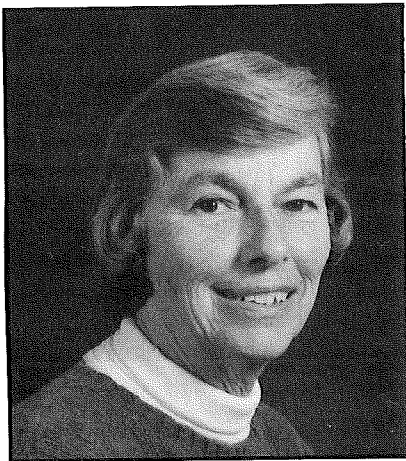
*For Overseers, Members of Ministry and Counsel, and others involved
in pastoral care and counseling*

Vol. II, No. 2

January, 1995

SUPPORTING FAMILIES THROUGH SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

by Jean B. Robbins



Jean Robbins

So often a meeting is stunned by the news that an active couple in the meeting is separating. How has this happened without someone -- some Overseer -- sensing that the couple was struggling with their relationship? And, how can we be present to the family in this time of crisis in a way which is caring and constructive? One would hope that a significant relationship had begun between the couple and the meeting before this moment of crisis. Though it may not always be possible to have a meaningful connection prior to the crisis, our work can be eased if such is the case.

Where do we begin? Remembering that we are not responsible for "fixing" the situation, and grounding ourselves in our belief of the Spirit's presence, may help to reduce the anxiety which so many of us experience when hearing of marital problems. Certainly, there needs to be a readiness on the part of the Overseer to listen deeply. Listening deeply with care does not mean delving into what went wrong in the past. It involves nonjudgmental listening and moving along with the persons who are hurting, beginning with where they are at the moment.

While it may be natural for an Overseer to assume that couples have their own inner resources to work through the pain, in reality those who are hurting often cannot see beyond their own troubles. Often they do not know where or how to seek help. To have a caring Overseer who will share the journey through the separation and eventually the divorce can be very helpful.

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice* reminds us that, "Those who are asked to give counsel should remember that often the best service is to be a good listener. When advice is given, the attitude of the counselor may be more helpful than any specific recommendations. This attitude should always be one of friendliness and love."

Acknowledging the Problem

If the meeting has a sense of community, there should be a feeling of mutual responsibility for each other's welfare. Everyone needs to be thinking as an Overseer. The Advices in *Faith and Practice* (Phila.YM) speak to this when they encourage us to "live affectionately as friends, entering with sympathy into joys and sorrows of one another's daily lives. Visit one another. Be alert to give help and receive it. Bear the burdens of one another's failings; share the buoyancy of one another's strengths."

When a marital crisis is recognized, it involves risk taking on the part of the Overseer or trusted member of the meeting. Too often we worry that we are intruding in the crisis. The Friends in the critical situation, however, need to know that the meeting cares about them. Avoidance for fear of intrusion runs a strong risk of sending a message of not caring, particularly since our experience teaches us that those lost in the crisis often are unable to take initiative in asking for help.

A couple who have been through this painful crisis deepened my understanding of what, at least for them, had been helpful. They spoke of how they were grateful for the concern of the meeting, although they did acknowledge that, by the time Overseers learned of the problem, the condition was in the advanced stages of pain and anger. They stressed the importance of the referral Overseers made to the Friends Counseling Service. Although it took them a while to come to the decision to ask for help from the Counseling Service, they felt in retrospect that it had been a great help for them. They hope that all Overseers are aware of counseling resources in their community, being especially mindful of those which are offered on the basis of Friends' values.

The couple also appreciated that an effort was made on the part of the meeting to call upon them for help with meeting projects. Those requests served to keep them involved with the meeting.

Engaging More Deeply

At the time of separation, overwhelming feelings of pain, anger and a sense of failure

often come to the surface. Also, there can be a feeling of guilt about a promise being broken, a promise that was made earnestly and with love. Because this is the end of a relationship, a grieving process ensues. Accompanying all these emotions may be a feeling of anxiety about what lies ahead. Women often seem to have the ability to communicate with a network of friends. Men hurt just as much, but frequently are inclined to be stoic and not communicative. Some of the issues that are heard among couples in crisis are these: he/she does not "hear" me; he/she pays no attention to the children; trust has broken down; another person has entered the life of one or the other; he/she is physically and/or psychologically abusive; drug or alcohol abuse is a problem.

One way to connect with troubled Friends, as they wrestle with these feelings and issues, is to suggest meeting in a neutral spot for a time to talk and listen. The meetinghouse or the Overseer's home with an invitation to tea, for example, are both settings in which the folks gathered can have an awareness of safety and caring. Coming together at the meetinghouse can bring a sense of calm and a reminder of the Divine Presence.

No matter where the gathering occurs, it is essential that confidentiality be emphasized and respected. This applies not only to the way in which the Overseers will hold appropriate confidences in relation to what is shared by the couple; it also applies to the two persons who are separating.

One way of helping to stabilize the separation process is to help the couple come to agreement about what each of them will be sharing with people regarding the cause of the separation. That is: can each trust the other to hold some things confidential to the two of them, or will each, out of fear of what the other is saying, begin to tell his or her side of the story to anyone who will listen? Further, the couple

This Newsletter is published quarterly by the Family Relations Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Trish Walat, clerk. Comments and suggestions are always welcome. Please do not duplicate. To obtain additional copies, contact Helene Pollock, Editor, at (215) 988-0140.

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The Friends Counseling Service

Counseling needs of members and attenders may at times exceed what the Meeting can provide. Within Philadelphia YM, the Friends Counseling Service can be a resource. All counselors are active Friends whose spiritual lives are integral to their counseling. Fees are on a sliding scale. Counselors are:

Henry Beck, Ph.D.

Bala Cynwyd, PA
(215) 664-5443

Ray Bentman, M.Ed.

Philadelphia, PA
(215) 985-1314

Annie Burrows, M.A.

Kennett Square/Phila. PA
(215) 444-1824

Terence Carroll, ACSW

Philadelphia, PA
(215) 473-2600

Teresa A. Glatthorn, M.A.

Hatboro, PA
(215) 672-6627

John L. Hall, M.A.

Chester Springs, PA
(610) 458-9060

Harriet Heath, Ph.D.

(parenting issues only)
Haverford, PA
(215) 649-7037

Winifred S. Hope, M.Ed, M.S.S.

King of Prussia, PA
(215) 293-9720

Gary M. Johnson, Ph.D.

Wilmington, DE
(302) 656-1295

Arlene Kelly, ACSW

Philadelphia, PA
(215) 849-0598

Deborah Osborne-Daily, M.Ed.

Philadelphia, PA
(215) 248-0489

Judith Owens, M.A.

Voorhees, NJ
(609) 768-4114

Karin Sannwald, ACSW

Berlin, NJ
(609) 767-6471

James J. Saxon, Ph.D.

Swarthmore, PA
(215) 544-9634

John Scardina, Ed.M.

Doylestown/Westtown, PA
(215) 429-3489

Barbara T. Snipes, M.A.

Morrisville, PA/
Riverton, NJ

(215) 428-0315

Ann Swain, M.S.W.

Glen Mills, PA
(215) 399-1977

Fran Van Allen, M.A.

Philadelphia/Media, PA
(215) 358-3212

Lindley M. Winston, M.D.

Malvern, PA
(215) 647-1237

Two Friends Reflect on Their Experience of Separating

Reflections from Susan (not her real name): Before the actual breakup I mentioned to a couple of people in the meeting that things were difficult. People offered support as individuals -- without judgment, without taking sides. They said "we're there for you." That meant a lot. After we had separated, and with John's awareness, I wrote a letter to Overseers saying that after a lengthy struggle and real agonizing we had both concluded that separation was the best course. Both of us wanted to continue as members of the meeting, and I didn't want Friends to be guessing or to feel divided. But after Overseers received the letter, some Overseers seemed to almost pointedly ignore me. This was so extremely painful as I felt so exposed and vulnerable. Some others -- even those I don't know well -- did show that they cared, and that meant a lot to me.

Later John and I ran into a real dilemma around an important issue in our separation. One day I was praying about it, and I received a message to call a clearness committee. I asked John and he agreed, and we decided together on whom to ask. It was important to me that the people on the committee be even-handed, and that they trust in the Spirit. I wasn't looking for opinions -- I wanted the clearness process to be prayerful and Spirit-centered. And for the most part it was. When we talked and prayerfully sought guidance about the problem together, the negativity was lifted, and it never returned.

As for those wishing to help couples in our situation, I would ask you to trust that most people have made their decision after an enormous amount of soul searching, and with great sorrow. You can give people in this situation a great gift by suspending judgment and by extending compassion, understanding and support. Just be there for them -- just a kind word is really all that's needed. And for God's sake don't ignore them! That's the most painful thing -- to not even acknowledge that it's happened! I know others in the meeting who have had a similar experience.

John's reflections: We made the decision to separate on our own. We didn't tell Overseers we were thinking of it. It was too late for them to do anything about the separation. But the clearness committee did help us. When members of the committee expressed several points of view, that legitimized the points of view that Susan and I had, which were in conflict. In allowing the opposites to become clear, the committee created a space for reconciliation. But it wasn't easy. Half-way through it didn't look like there would be any solution at all. Finally one person offered a fairly simple statement of the problem and a simple solution, and everyone united behind it. It wasn't so much a new solution; it was the way that the problem was stated that made the difference. I call it the voice of the Spirit. It was sort of like wandering through a maze in a garden, but from a higher perspective it looks simple. It means moving beyond the idea that any one opinion is "right."

Although this wasn't the issue in our clearness process, one thing meetings could do with couples who are separating would be to help them make a recommitment to the kids. The meeting can provide a framework to help the couple -- and their children -- to affirm and accept the new situation, even though there's a lot of pain involved.

From the Perspective of the Committee Members. The committee members did not always find it easy to be open. As one member admitted, "Before the clearness meeting I had already come to see one side as in the right. So I realized that I would really need to be quiet, to listen and to be open during the clearness process, in order to fully hear both sides and to see the 'party in the wrong' as a person. That was my prayer. Then I was grateful when the Spirit broke through the meeting. The Spirit showed us a way that was simple and clear."

Note: Susan and John had some real differences in the way that they experienced the clearness process. Particular comments which seemed quite judgmental to one were seen as supportive by the other. Yet both John and Susan appreciated the committee members' willingness to be available to the process.

should be asked about their wishes in regard to the sharing of information beyond the individual or small group of Overseers meeting with them.

At times, Overseers can be helpful in assisting the couple with the painful task of letting their faith community know of the breakdown of their marriage. Yet there are also couples who prefer that the responsibility of informing the meeting be left to them.

Different Models for Meeting Involvement

I remember particularly a struggling couple who, several years ago, asked to meet with a specific Overseer. One of the pair was not willing to seek professional help, but agreed to meet with spouse and the designated Overseer. The Overseer labored lovingly with the couple every two weeks for many months, meeting together in a comfortable corner of the meetinghouse. In this setting one could listen deeply with a feeling of reverence. Each meeting was entered into with prayerful worship, closing the same way. Anger and disbelief were expressed by each party in the presence of the caring Overseer. Certain issues needed to be addressed: How would the separation be handled when telling the children? When notifying the meeting? Where would each one live? Who would pay the bills? This part of the separation was not easy. Money matters seemed to be more of an obstacle than some of the other issues. The one spouse hoped that everything would be "fixed up" by these sessions, but the other was determined to end the marriage. Eventually the couple came to terms of separation with the Overseer walking with them through the process.

When asked by the couple to meet with them, the Overseer felt inadequate in this role. In order to be present to them, she sought and received support from the Friends Counseling Service, through telephone consultation. While respecting the confidentiality of the couple, she was able to talk through her role in the situation, thus enabling her to be more present to them. Sadly one of the partners withdrew membership in this meeting, but did find a spiritual home within another nearby meeting.

It was too painful for her to stay where her spouse was still very much in evidence.

In another instance, a couple separated largely because of the husband's alcohol abuse. That symptom signalled a problem with the relationship. Since the couple were in counseling and the husband felt that the alcohol problem was his, and not the meeting's, no specific request was made of Overseers. Both, however, were very involved with meeting committees and projects, as were the children. This involvement kept them participating faithfully in the meeting, giving each one a sense of belonging. The wife appreciated the meeting's concern, and fortunately understood that members felt inhibited about offering help in small ways unless she specifically asked for it. Then there was a warm response. After a year of separation, during which time the husband dealt effectively with his alcoholism, the couple made the decision to reunite, and asked for a Clearness Committee of two Friends of their choice. The role of that committee was to help the couple examine the commitment they were making to each other as they came back into their marriage on a new basis.

In still another situation, a clearness committee of three trusted Friends was chosen by a couple who had agreed to separate. They informed the committee that their decision to separate was definite but they asked for help in working through the separation in a way consistent with their values as Friends. The committee helped them to deal with the issues of child support, responsibilities of caring for the children, distribution of property, etc. As the issues were worked out, this committee became a means of accountability for each party.

This was a situation in which the matter of property was not complicated. When the assets are more complex, the role of the committee may be that of helping the couple come to clearness about the principles they want to guide their division of property, followed by a referral to an accountant or some other person with appropriate training. That person, then, can help to ensure that their division of assets is consistent with those principles.

Supporting the Children

Through most of these struggles children are caught in the chaos of the marital crisis. They need some stability and the assurance that they are not responsible for the separation. My meeting arranged for a counselor to come for a discussion of how to nurture families through the crisis of family breakdown. It was a beneficial time for questions and constructive suggestions from a professional.

If possible, it is wise for the children to stay in the same school situation for continuity in their lives, as well as for support from those teachers and friends who know them and care about them. In the meeting, intergenerational games or discussions can enable positive interaction between children and the adults; movies for all ages can be a common denominator. Sometimes there is a special rapport between an adult and a particular child. This can grow as the adult takes the initiative by inviting that child to supper or to help set up refreshments after meeting. Children need to know that they are respected and loved by the meeting.

Having a Foundation in Place

We are much better able to meet people who are at a time of crisis if we have paid on-going attention to the development of community in the meeting. Activities and projects can be scheduled on a regular basis to lay the foundation for friendship. Small group discussions on almost any topic can help create a sense of safety and offer a chance to know one another in a deeper sense. Meeting functions such as pot luck meals can further the development of friendships. Breaking bread together is a comfortable and easy way to establish a friendly connection. "Friendly Eight" dinners and discussions are another avenue for encouraging a feeling of community. Having refreshments after Meeting for Worship each week is conducive to conversations among members and attenders; it creates a time for sensing joys and sorrows, struggles and needs. Intergenerational projects such as leaf raking, working on a Third World Craft Sale, or a flea market all help to build friendship and trust in one another. Working together on committees serves a dual purpose. Primarily, it accomplishes a task, such as sorting clothes for the American Friends Service Committee

material aid, planning for Quarterly Meeting program and meal, or helping with First Day School. Secondly, a closeness is developed with those persons involved in the project.

Summary

Each situation is different; no specific formula can be given. In the examples cited, we saw several different models of the way in which the meeting, through its Overseers, were involved in ways which the couples found helpful. The Spirit usually leads to a solution if those Overseers involved can discern what the couple needs and wants as well as being a presence -- walking beside them through this painful time. Again, *Faith and Practice* of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting reminds us that "the affectionate care and sympathy of the Meeting should continue to be given to members who have been divorced. Problems of readjustment may be very difficult. Friendliness and understanding may then be of great help."

Jean Robbins, a longtime Overseer, has been a member of Westfield Meeting, in Cinnaminson, NJ, since 1950. In January, 1995, she will begin service as clerk of the meeting, after serving on Overseers, Worship and Ministry and the Religious Education Committee for many years.

Queries for Reflection

1. Do we, as Overseers or members of Ministry and Counsel, ground ourselves in an awareness of God's Presence?
2. How do we, as Overseers or members of Ministry and Counsel, enter a marital crisis?
3. Am I willing to take the risk of walking through this crisis with the couple, with love?
4. Can I listen nonjudgmentally? What might help me to do this still more effectively?
5. How can our meeting develop better ways for letting members know how to access confidential help when needed?