

Faith and Marital Stability:  
Toward an understanding of the role of the church in marital stability

In the winter 2005 ANSR Poll survey of a random sample of active, adult members of the Church of the Nazarene more than half (56%) agreed with the statement, “Christians are just as likely to divorce as are non-Christians.” Is this perception accurate? Are active, committed Christians as likely to divorce as non-Christians? In what ways do faith and the ministry of the church influence marital stability? Is a conversion experience alone enough to reduce the likelihood of divorce?

*Evidence from Recent Research*

Studies of divorce have generally found that married couples who agree about their religious affiliation and involvement and who believe religion is important are significantly less likely to divorce (Bramlett and Moser 2002: 18, 20; The National Marriage Project 2004: 19; Teachman 2002: 342; Heaton 2002: 405; Larson and Holman 1994: 232)

However, in a study reported September 8, 2004, the Barna Group found no difference in rates of divorce between “born again” Christians and non-Christians (The Barna Group, 2004). According to this study, 35% of “born again” Christians and 35% of non-Christians have experienced a divorce. The Barna study was based on interviews with a nationally representative sample of 3,614 adults. It focused on adults (18 years of age or older) who have been married at least once.

One of the important differences between the Barna Group’s study and other national studies appears to be that the Barna study looked especially at “Born again Christians” without regard to church affiliation or involvement. Born again Christians were defined as people who said they have made “a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today” and “who also indicated they believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior.” While other studies have found church affiliation and involvement to be significant, these factors were not the focus of the Barna research, which centered more narrowly on religious experience and belief.

Their findings suggest that a conversion experience alone, even if it continues to be important to the person, is not enough to make divorce less likely. Born again Christians identified by the Barna Group in a random sample of the general population on the basis of their testimony and belief have evidently not been helped enough by their faith to make their marriages more stable.

In fact, the Barna study may be consistent, rather than at odds with the findings of other studies since it focused on conversion rather than involvement. It is religious affiliation, the importance of religion for the couple, and shared participation in religion that has been found to reduce, although not eliminate, the probability of divorce. A conversion experience, as important as it is, does not appear to be enough to significantly change life patterns.

One of the approaches many Americans are using these days as they seek to significantly change life patterns is participation in twelve step groups. In a Christian context, the third of the twelve steps might be understood as the decision and experience of conversion (e.g.,

<http://www.mtn.org/EA/Steps.html>). It is essential to get through step three, but the success of twelve step programs appears to rest on the willingness of the participants to go on through the remaining steps, and to do this in the context of a fellowship of other seekers whose experience, strength, and hope are shared with each other so that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover. Stopping at step three leaves the seeker without both the support and the spiritual discipline necessary for significant change. The "touch and go" evangelism strategies used by many American evangelical churches tend to give seekers the idea that getting "saved" or being "born again" is all that is necessary and to leave new believers without the nurturing, support, and spiritual progress necessary for a genuinely changed life.

One of the inferences that have been made from the Barna Group study is that the people in our churches are just as likely to divorce as non-Christians. In fact, the data reported do not provide a means to address this question. The sample used was of believers in the general population who may, but may not have been active in any church. Therefore, unless there is some evidence that the proportions of church participants experiencing divorce are as high as the non-Christians in the Barna study, it would not be accurate to tell a congregation of participants in a Nazarene worship service that they are as likely to divorce as are non-Christians.

#### *Additional Evidence*

The U.S. Congregational Life Survey was conducted in April and May of 2001 (Woolever and Bruce 2002). The more than 6,000 respondents who were worshipping in a sample of congregations of the Church of the Nazarene on that spring Sunday morning included many who were mature in their faith and have been deeply involved in the church for some time, but also some who were new to the congregations and to the faith, as well as some others who no doubt had not yet experienced conversion. Among the 4,900 of these worshipers who were at least 18 years old and had ever been married, 23% said they were either currently divorced (8%) or had remarried after a divorce (15%). This is significantly lower than the 35% the Barna Group found in the general population.

It might be asserted that the difference between the 35% in the general population and the 23% attending a worship service is just a result of the fact that people who divorce are more likely to leave churches. They may feel awkward in congregational relationships with married people or they may feel stigmatized. In fact, according to a study of currently divorced men and women in protestant churches, including the Church of the Nazarene, 31% were no longer attending the same church they attended when the decision to divorce was made. However, almost all were still a part of some church. Only 4% of the people studied had completely dropped out of church participation (Erben 1997).

The Nazarene 23% having experienced divorce is similar to other denominations. Among comparable participants from all religious groups involved in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, the percentage experiencing divorce was 19% (8% currently divorced and 11% remarried after a divorce). The 4% difference in percentages between the 19% in all groups and the 23% among the Nazarene respondents may be the result of several things.

It might be partly due to sampling error. A variation of plus or minus 1% might be expected in the Nazarene response at the 95% confidence level. The general accuracy of a percentage around 23% is, however, supported by the fact that a very similar percentage was found in the winter 2005 ANSR Poll where 21% of those active, adult members who had ever been married had experienced divorce.

A second partial explanation of the difference between 19% and 23% might be that Nazarenes are doing slightly better at accepting and ministering to people who experience divorce so that they are more likely to continue in their congregation.

It might also be that part of the difference is explained by Nazarene congregations doing a little better at welcoming new people who have experienced divorce. Actually, among new, formerly unchurched married adults in the study the percentage that had experienced divorce was 39%. If this group had been a larger proportion of all worshipers, their experience would have raised the overall percentage higher than the 23%

A fourth partial explanation of the difference may be that we are a denomination that serves groups with more of the other characteristics that make divorce more likely; for example, younger age at marriage, fewer with college education, and more with lower incomes.

### *Faith and Stability*

Religious faith, affiliation, and participation are not the only, or even the most significant factors influencing marital stability. Several other factors interact with the influence of faith. For example, some of the behaviors that have been found to put people at greater risk of marital dissolution are actions churches seek to prevent, like initiation of sex before marriage, premarital parenthood, premarital cohabitation (Heaton 2002: 405; Teachman 2002: 345; Larson and Holman 1994: 233).

Some other risk factors are part of the groups served. Members of some religious groups tend to marry at a younger age than in other groups, and age at marriage significantly influences the likelihood of divorce (Heaton 2002: 395). People with at least some college are less likely to divorce than those with less education (Teachman 2002: 333). People with family incomes greater than \$50,000 are less likely to divorce than those with less than \$25,000 (The National Marriage Project 2004: 19). So religious groups that tend to minister among people who marry younger, have less education, and have lower family incomes serve people more at risk, and therefore, have special opportunities for ministry but also might be expected to have higher levels of marital disruption.

These risk factors are real issues for the Church of the Nazarene. According to the winter 2005 ANSR Poll, 34% of our lay members were married by the time they were 20 years old and another 23% married when they were 21 or 22. While one-third (33%) of the members reported at least a college baccalaureate degree as their highest level of education completed, 28% said their highest level of education completed was high school or less. And, 20% of members report a household income of under \$25,000, with another 32% above that but less than \$50,000.

Faith itself may become a factor in divorces. For example, when one party in a marriage is a believer and active in a church while the other rejects faith, this may become a source of conflict that leads to divorce. Furthermore, while most congregations, Sunday school classes, and other small groups help couples by providing examples and beliefs that affirm the importance of maintaining and strengthening their marriages, in some groups the beliefs and experiences of influential leaders and members provide frameworks where the unthinkable becomes plausible and divorce becomes a more acceptable alternative to couples in the group.

### *Conclusion*

The perception that Christians involved in a church are just as likely to divorce as are non-Christians, is apparently not accurate. However, to significantly affect marital stability apparently requires a level of Christian maturity beyond that indicated by just professing a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important today and indicating that when you die you expect to go to Heaven because you have confessed your sins and accepted Jesus Christ as your savior.

Step three of the Twelve Step program is evidently not enough to significantly change one's life course. Something very similar to steps four through twelve of the Twelve Step programs have been an important part of the Nazarene culture and appear to remain important. Steps four and five deal with repentance and confession. Steps six and seven deal with becoming willing to let God cleanse the person and remove defects of character. Steps eight and nine deal with restitution. Steps ten and eleven deal with growth in grace, and step twelve is about mission, sharing the good news. Stopping anywhere short of the twelfth step denies the person the opportunity to experience all that God has available.

In contrast to George Whitefield, who is reported to have "hoped that those who had been 'awakened' would follow through on their own initiative," John Wesley "left nothing to chance. He made sure that those who were serious about leading a new life were channeled into small groups for growth in discipleship" (Henderson, 1997, page 28).

Active, committed Christians are not as likely to divorce as non-Christians. Married couples who have a shared faith and are involved with together in a church are not as likely to divorce. While there is certainly a need to improve, the church is not broken in the vital area of ministry to families. It evidently can and does make some positive difference in this area of life as well as in others.

## References

- The ANSR Poll – Winter 2005, *The winter 2005 ANSR Poll was mailed early in February to senior pastors (709) of a random sample of Nazarene congregations in the United States and Canada, to the spouses of married pastors in the sample (647), and to a representative sample of active, adult members (347). By April 8, 2005, responses had been received from 251 (72%) members, 382 (59%) spouses, and 392 (55%) pastors. The response from pastors was generally representative of the distribution of Nazarene churches by size and region, and the response from members was generally representative of the distribution of Nazarene members in churches of various sizes and regions. While these levels of response are good, some caution should be exercised in generalizing results. With sample responses of this size, the margin of error is within plus or minus 6%.*
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