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Church Ministers to Pastor  
During Marriage Crisis

By Gail Rothwell

COLUMBUS, Miss. (BP)--Joe and Margaret McKeever hold hands like newlyweds as they talk about future plans and openly share their feelings.

But the McKeevers aren't newlyweds, and they haven't always been this happy. In September 1979, Joe told Margaret he wanted a divorce.

They had been married 17 years and he had been pastor of First Baptist Church in Columbus, Miss., since 1974. "Our marriage wasn't all bad," he said, "but more like a roller coaster of ups and downs."

"I always knew God had picked Margaret out for me," Joe explained, "but I asked her for a divorce because I was depressed and miserable. When you are disobedient to God you either have to get all the way in or all the way out, and I felt that out was better."

The McKeevers identified their problem as a lack of honest sharing of inner feelings, which also made it impossible to be honest with themselves. The problem caused McKeever to spend more and more time away from home with ministry-related duties.

Their marriage crisis climaxed when Margaret walked into the church office and found Joe drawing cartoons, one of his favorite pastimes. She picked up the bottle of ink, poured it on the cartoons and charged, "You have time to do whatever you want to do, except spend time at home."

Shortly after this episode McKeever informed church leaders and staff members that he intended to divorce his wife.

"At this point the staff began ministering to me," he said. The church leaders offered emotional support and love, but told him if he divorced his wife he could no longer be pastor of the church.

"It was a good thing for us the church took the stand it did," McKeever explained. "If they would have said, 'Okay, divorce your wife,' it would have been all the encouragement I needed to go through with my decision."

Later that fall McKeever realized that God wanted him to stay with his wife, family and church. "I realized that in 10 years nobody would ever remember how many Foreign Mission Board committees I had served on and that when I left they would appoint someone to fill my space. But being a husband and father is not like that."

After Thanksgiving 1979 McKeever resigned as a Foreign Mission Board trustee, and canceled a trip to the Holy Land, two revivals and other commitments he had scheduled for 1980. "I made four resolutions then: I was going to stay home more, go to more Alabama football games, do something serious with my cartooning and be a good pastor of First Baptist Church, Columbus."

Both the McKeevers have learned to make a lot of changes in the past two years. "I have decided you have time to do what you want to do," he said. "It is a cop-out for ministers to

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think they are subject to unrealistic time demands. A minister has to realize he lives in a world of unfinished jobs."

During the crisis period McKeever spent time with his family, but Margaret says, "The time I was getting from him was not satisfying. Earlier in our marriage I felt that the church was the culprit in the relationship, but by 1978 I realized our problems were personal and I couldn't blame anyone else."

During the past two years the McKeevers have learned to give each other the freedom to be themselves. "I am also learning it is very important for me to be on Joe's team," she said on their 19th anniversary. "The Lord is helping me to learn the importance of choosing him now, today, not just when I said 'I do.'"

The McKeevers learned they can decline invitations and sometimes say the pastor is not available.

Once a month the McKeevers get their calendars together and plan for a month of weekly luncheon dates. "This two hours of scheduled time we have set aside each week to be with each other is so simple, yet so satisfying I wonder why we didn't think of it before," she exclaimed.

The McKeevers agree the real heroes of their story are the members of First Baptist Church, Columbus, Miss. The church has continued to support them and respond to their needs. After sharing with the church how God has healed their home the McKeevers were overwhelmed with calls and letters from church members expressing love, encouragement and support.

"Our church has been willing to accept our humanity and give us the freedom to be ourselves," McKeever said. "In churches we have the tendency to play like everything is perfect, when we know it isn't. The church should be the one place on earth where we should be able to accept each other as we are. After all, the number one criteria for being there is to admit to being a sinner."

Many Southern Baptist churches will observe a special week of emphasis on families May 3-10, Christian Home Week.

Old wounds are still sensitive for the McKeevers and old patterns of behavior still crop up. "We're still struggling today," he said. "But we have come through this thing with the knowledge that we really love each other."

"The future holds good things for us," said Margaret, who is working toward a degree in marriage and family counseling. As a result of their problems she has determined to help other families.

"I know that God has had a hand in what has happened and what will happen. This thing has helped me learn how much I really love Joe and that you can depend on God when the bottom drops out."

Humankind Still  
Essential of Faith

WASHINGTON (BP)--Humankind—not technology—is still the basic raw material of religion in an age of rapid change and falling faith in institutions, says Time magazine's David Snyder.

Even electronic church followers will worship by "two way" communication rather than around a "home computer," Snyder told participants in the annual Interfaith Religious Public Relations Council meeting.

In a futurist's role, Snyder cited key factors he believes will affect society in the coming decade. He said attitudes toward institutions are at an all-time low and still deteriorating, though the church enjoys a slightly better reputation than most areas.

Part of the problem, according to Snyder, is that the present "baby boom" generation has experienced institutions firsthand and discovered they do make errors. Further, institutions cannot deal with the natural diversities of humankind.

The problem for the church and other institutions could be compounded if Snyder is right. For example, he says "with some certainty about the next 10 years:"

--Individual behavior, rather than response to institutions, will set trends. The future evolves in an orderly fashion and is a consequence of the amassed reality of the past;

--While large institutions don't change much, individuals and households change much faster. He cited health concerns and lifestyle changes voluntarily adopted since the 1960s;

--It will be an "orderly society" versus "individuality."

A "more intelligently powerful society" will lean increasingly toward self-employment, a trend in the country even at the present time, he noted.

A possible plus for the church is that, according to Snyder, religious values are an ongoing element in society because they are based on human nature, not technology.

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Education Is Knowledge  
Mercer President Says

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MACON, Ga. (BP)--Education has an identity crisis that stems from treating its purpose as the dissemination of information rather than knowledge says Mercer University President R. Kirby Godsey.

"Information alone will not provide knowledge," Godsey told university trustees at their spring meeting. He said America is moving from an economy dominated by industry to one dominated by a flood of information that bewilders intelligent life.

"Our access to information is outstripping our ability to understand," he said. "Understanding is a child of learning and knowledge. Educators cannot become mere transmitters in the information network. The task of educators is to make sense of the network."

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Lesbian Mother Loses  
Child Custody Battle

WASHINGTON (BP)--The U.S. Supreme Court has let stand a Kentucky court's ruling that removed a young girl from her lesbian mother's custody, placing her instead in the home of her remarried father.

When Luann and Gary Ray Stevenson of Louisville were divorced in 1977, custody of their infant daughter was awarded to the mother, following the normal pattern. More than a year later, however, when Mrs. Stevenson disclosed her new lifestyle, her husband went to court seeking custody.

A trial court heard conflicting testimony over the question of whether Mrs. Stevenson's lesbianism had affected or would in the future adversely affect her daughter's development. Among the facts disclosed was that the mother had for a short period worked at a lesbian bar, had moved her lover into her house, and had exchanged vows with the lover in a "mock" wedding ceremony.

But the trial court ruled, among other factors, that because Mrs. Stevenson did not openly display her lesbianism in the child's presence, she was entitled to retain custody.

The father then took his case to the Kentucky Court of Appeals, which reversed the trial panel, ruling that he adequately demonstrated that a Kentucky law permitted the change in custody. The law holds that custody of a child shall not be changed earlier than two years after the initial decree unless "there is reason to believe that the child's present environment may endanger seriously his physical, mental, moral or emotional health."

After the Kentucky Supreme Court refused to review that decision, Mrs. Stevenson asked the nation's high court to intervene, arguing that she had been denied due process and equal protection of the law.

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Disaster Relief Unit  
Helps After Tornado

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KIEFER, Okla. (BP)--The Oklahoma Baptist disaster relief unit fed more than 300 meals as workers, National Guardsmen and residents began the recovery process after an Easter Sunday tornado.

The unit—a 40-foot converted moving van—moved into Kiefer, a suburb of Tulsa, within hours after the tornado had ripped through the area, killing at least five persons and causing property damage in the millions of dollars.

For 11 hours, the unit fed residents and relief workers as recovery efforts began. The feeding was required, said Oklahoma officials, because natural gas was cut off to the area and the only restaurant in Kiefer was damaged by the storm.

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