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EDITORIALS

Demands of an Aging Population: Family Solutions

The ramifications of this social phenomenon are enormous.

"Sooner or later we're gonna getcha!" went the old White Owl cigar commercial on television. That's the feeling many have about old age. The elderly, the aged, the senior citizens, the Gray Panthers: they're always somebody else out there. Then one day it hits you: you've just retired, you've become a grandparent for the fourth time, or you've been promoted to the "old people's" class in your Sunday school. Remember how hard it was to admit—to yourself and to others? But finally, you confessed that you were old.

People have always gotten old and died. In the past, the elderly weren't a problem because there weren't very many of them. Families generally managed to take care of old grandparents until they died. Those who survived went to the county home.

All of that has changed. Now the U.S. population includes 25 million persons 65 years old and over. If the death rate continues to drop, their number will increase to 38 million in 20 years. That's to say nothing of the very old people. A decade ago 4.4 percent of Americans were 75 years old and over; by the year 2000 that percentage could leap to 6.9. That equals nearly 18 million persons. Experts talk about the "young old" (those who have just turned 65) and the "old old" (those in the 80s or older).

The ramifications of this social phenomenon are enormous. For example, if those over 65 continue to enter nursing homes at current rates, the number of residents will increase from 1.3 million last year to 2.1 million by the year 2000. If death rates continue to fall, however, the nursing home population could reach 2.8 million.

Many elderly persons live with relatives who are rapidly losing their financial ability to carry the load. Women who in the past stayed home to care for an elderly relative now must work. Actually, the major problem in caring for older people at home is time, not money.

Another important social factor is that with people liv-

ing longer, "young old" children must care for their "old" parents. Women in their late 60s care for their year-old mothers and their 70-year-old husbands. Financial and other pressures on these women are incredible. Longevity aggravates the squeeze on retirement income while inflation grinds away at the living standard. Assuming a 10 percent inflation rate (low by today's figures) over the next decade, today's \$100-a-month pension will be worth only \$39.

Despite these rather bleak forecasts for the elderly, some experts see positive signs for the future. George Maddox, director of Duke University's Center for Study of Aging and Human Development, says tomorrow's elderly population will be better educated, in generally better health, and have greater economic security. Robert N. Butler, director of the National Institute on Aging, says that predictions of a "doddering, unproductive, stagnant society" are unfair and inaccurate. The issue, he claims, is how society comes to grips with the reality of human change. We can no longer pretend aging will somehow pass us by.

The CHRISTIANITY TODAY-Gallup Poll makes clear that persons 50 and older are by no means worried about the future. Fifty-nine percent described their outlook for the U.S. over the next 20 years as either "optimistic," "very optimistic," while only 30 percent said "pessimistic" or "very pessimistic" (11 percent didn't know). Further, persons 50 and older identified their most important personal needs as "physical well-being—health," "salvation—closeness to God," and "love and affection." These needs match exactly with those of people of all ages, demonstrating that we have no basis for isolating the elderly.

Similar parallels occur in responses to the question about where to find help with personal problems. Both those 50 and older and the public as a whole answer first



member of my immediate family," and second, "a member of the clergy." Ranking last is "a government organization." And despite all the good being done by volunteer community organizations, both the public and private, people 50 and over chose such groups next to last as a source of help with a "personal development" problem. The same goes for money problems and for problems of food, clothing, and shelter: young and old alike turn first to their "immediate family" for help.

What should Christians do, therefore, about the mushrooming population of the "young old" and the "old old"? We must give top priority to maintaining family stability. It is essential for the families of older persons to seek bonds of love and sacrifice that enable them to stick together through the most serious social, physical, and financial onslaughts.

At the same time, we call for fresh ideas about how to obey the biblical injunctions about family life in a time of rapidly changing circumstances and values. "Honor your father and your mother" applies not only to preschoolers and teen-agers alone. It applies to all people at all stages of life, and necessarily includes caring for the elderly in our families. To abandon them because they are living too long to suit our priorities, or because we would have to reduce our living standard, is to dishonor our parents. We may have to cut back on discretionary spending. We may have to remind teen-agers and young adults that they, too, can care for the elderly.

God equates neglect of family duties with unbelief and disobedience. "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8). Such provision includes financial support, but goes well beyond. Emotional well-being is critical. It is not enough to send checks, or to find a nice retirement home for one's elderly parents. The toughest demand is finding time for them; regular visits are imperative.

When conditions require institutional care for the elderly, no one should have to endure false guilt feelings. Newly improved facilities owned and operated by Christians are an impressive evangelical accomplishment of recent years. Calling for family care for the elderly in no way downgrades the value of such Christian institutions. In many families are short-circuiting the responsibilities and rewards of taking care of their own—simply because they think they don't have the time and money to do it.

Family stability and family responsibility are the essentials of our Christian commitment to the aging. Interestingly, what the polls show people desire—help from their own families first—is what God tells us to provide. We urge Christian institutions and churches to work now to give practical counsel. Intergenerational Christian education should be explored. Creative counselors have found that young and old provide an exciting mix, if they are given a chance. Churches should initiate discussions that deal with money, jobs, nursing care, and other long-range problems facing the elderly and their families.

When our elderly parents and relatives suffer serious illness, physical disability, or mental limitations, it's painful to be in their company and difficult to offer them the love and care they need. But our faith demands it. □

Picking from Fromm's and Other Psychologies

Erich Fromm was well known and widely read as a psychoanalyst and social critic. From the beginning of his career as a Freudian analyst until his death in March, Fromm's stimulating insights articulated the struggles of modern human beings and significantly influenced the direction of psychology and sociology. His writings covered a broad range of social and psychological issues, and included several penetrating criticisms of religion.

On the other hand, Fromm represented much that is weak about contemporary counseling. His rejection of God, criticism of the Scriptures, misunderstanding of the gospel, humanistic view of love, and belief in the omnipotence of social science all challenged the traditional beliefs of evangelicals. In spite of his perceptive writings, Fromm contributed to the distrust of psychology that persists in many churches.

If psychology has weaknesses, where does one turn for help? For many, the answer is found in self-help groups, popular speakers, and self-improvement books and articles that often combine biblical teachings with personal testimonies and psychological conclusions. As Gary Collins points out elsewhere in this issue, many of these approaches have been helpful, but they too have weaknesses and must be evaluated carefully.

The psychology boom that paralleled Fromm's lifetime and gave rise to popular approaches to helping has also given impetus to a counseling profession that includes many committed men and women, including pastors, who are both alert to contemporary counseling methods and guided by the Word of God. In times of crisis or other personal distress, there can be no substitute for the face-to-face involvement with a trained, sensitive counselor, especially one who is committed to Jesus Christ and dedicated to serving him through counseling.

We cannot permit the false premises and conclusions of influential scholars like Erich Fromm to deny us the help of properly trained therapists. Too often in the past Christians have allowed unscriptural theories to close doors of investigation and usefulness in the social sciences. The church can properly recognize and proclaim that the need for professional help with personal problems is neither a source of shame nor a cause for embarrassment. In fact, Fromm's popularity, especially his book, *The Art of Loving*, shows that people are hurting and want help. We cannot "pass by on the other side," as the priest and Levite did when they encountered the battered traveler, just because Fromm and others are at root anti-Christian. God's mercy requires that we use all available tools of healing. □



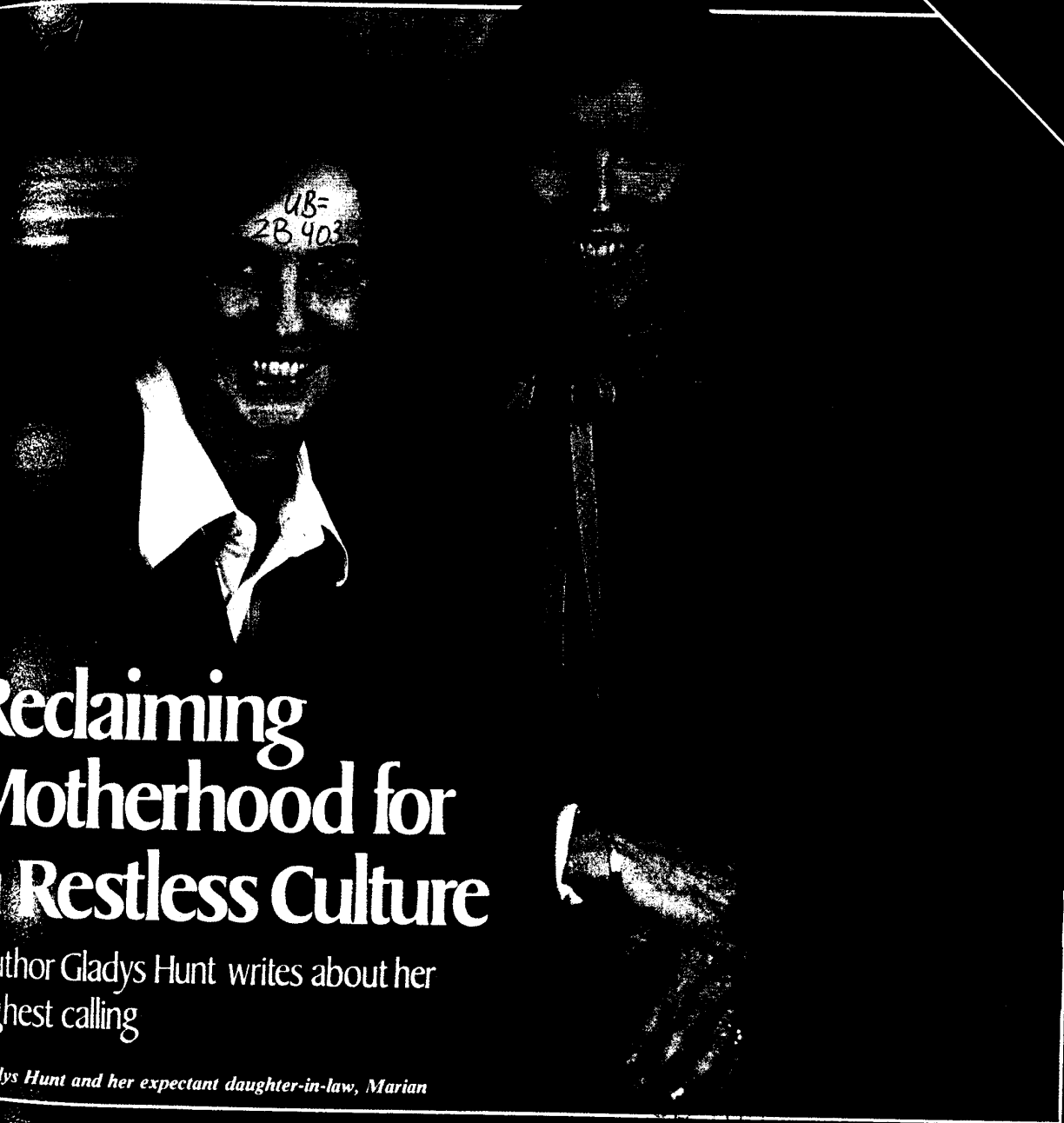
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Reclaiming Motherhood for a Restless Culture

Author Gladys Hunt writes about her
highest calling

Gladys Hunt and her expectant daughter-in-law, Marian