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BOOKS

## Theology for the family

### Leaving Home.

By Herbert Anderson and Kenneth R. Mitchell. Westminster John Knox, 160 pp., \$13.00 paperback.

### Becoming Married.

By Herbert Anderson and Robert Cotton Fite. Westminster John Knox, 170 pp., \$13.00 paperback.

### Regarding Children.

By Herbert Anderson and Susan B. W. Johnson. Westminster John Knox, 138 pp., \$13.00 paperback.

### Promising Again.

By Herbert Anderson, David Hogue and Marie McCarthy. Westminster John Knox, 145 pp., \$13.00 paperback.

### Living Alone.

By Herbert Anderson and Freda Gardner. Westminster John Knox, 140 pp., \$13.00 paperback.

FAMILIES HAVE seldom been the subject of theological reflection. Herbert Anderson, along with a changing group of coauthors, establishes a fresh framework in which to understand and minister to people in a variety of family situations. The books are organized chronologically around five major moments in the family life cycle. As in Erik Erikson's life stages, the resolution of the crises in the later phases depends on earlier accomplishments.

The cycle begins with a critical first step—that of “leaving home,” not just literally through physical separation but metaphorically through emotional differentiation. Anderson, professor of pastoral theology at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and author of *The Family and Pastoral Care*, and Kenneth R. Mitchell, professor of pastoral care at Eden Theological Seminary until

his sudden death in 1991 (Anderson and Mitchell had intended to coauthor the whole series), define leaving home as “a readiness, willingness and ability to make one's own decisions, and to make one's way in the world without undue emotional dependence on the home one has come from.” Recognition of and open communication about the unavoidable loss and grief that accompany change, as well as parental blessing and family and religious ritual, assure safe passage into new roles and self-understandings.

A better, albeit awkward, title for the first book in the series might have been “Leaving Home and Making a Home.” Despite the conventional Christian emphasis on pilgrimage and the American obsession with independence, sustaining community and creating a home are by no means simple or negligible tasks. On their concluding page, Anderson and Mitchell even speculate, correctly I think, that finding a home rather than leaving one may be the dominant agenda of our time.

More important, this change in title would highlight the prominent part that paradox—especially the paradox of “being separate together”—plays in all five books. Paradox does not just offer a way to hold the values of autonomy and community together. It typifies the human relationship with God. As Parker Palmer argues, the cross expresses the greatest paradox—“to live we have to die.” New life begins with loss. The death of old loyalties precedes the new creation in Christ.

Whether or not one agrees with this theology, the tension of paradox does capture essential qualities of Christian life in families. The task is not to overcome paradox but to learn to live well within it. As the introduction to the second book asserts, paradox can even provide the occasion for transformation. Consequently, leaving home, like all family transitions, is ultimately a religious act reminding us that all human homes are important but transitory.

Our ultimate destiny is to follow God's call. Conviction about God's participation in creation and redemption makes it possible to take the risks of leaving, committing, birthing, promising and living alone.

*Becoming Married* is the volume many will want to read prior to marriage. It might also help parents "stay close and stay out," an insight gleaned by Anderson himself during his children's wedding preparations. This volume seems to be written with greater confidence and command and is packed full of ideas and suggestions. Anderson and Robert Cotton Fite, a pastoral counselor, identify two primary tasks in becoming married: 1) understanding the legacies handed to us from our families of origin (which are often a major source of conflict)—rules, rituals, roles and expectations, and conceptions of right and wrong; and 2) planning a wedding and marriage that best link these legacies with particular religious traditions and the vision of the kind of family the couple desires to become.

The genogram, as described by Anderson and Fite, provides a wonderful alternative to the premarital personality inventories widely used to predict marital success or divorce. Creative use of the genogram, a map of the significant relationships of one's family of origin from a multigenerational point of view, helps partners discern their family stories and talk about what one wishes to leave behind and what one wants to retain. Instead of concentrating on individual personality quirks, the genogram emphasizes family history, story and future visions. This method seems much more amenable than questionnaires to linking personal stories to stories of God's redeeming action.

Since the serious work of building a marriage comes after the wedding, pastors must give a higher priority to supporting couples who are already

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*Reviewed by* Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *associate professor of pastoral theology at Vanderbilt University Divinity School and an author of From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate (forthcoming from Westminster John Knox).*

married. An overarching theme in all five books predominates here: much better than the myth of a picture-perfect wedding and relationship is the honest acknowledgment of the contradictory, parabolic reality of genuine marriage and its paradoxes of intimacy and distance, loss and gain. As framed by themes in the Jewish and Christian tradition, marital success ultimately rests upon taking the covenant partner with "abiding seriousness."

Abiding seriousness must extend equally to children, the subject of the third book. The volume suggests that our theologizing is limited unless it contains an anthropology "inclusive of children." Written with Susan B. W. Johnson, a Chicago pastor, the effort to establish familial ideals while avoiding blame leads to claims that appear contradictory on the surface: a variety of family forms can nurture children, but two parents are generally better than one. Anderson and Johnson's purpose—to negotiate a "middle way between families as they are and families as they ought to be"—makes such

seeming contradictions inevitable. The book traces a history and social pattern of indifference to children and constructs the parameters of "good enough" families within the "village" necessary to raise children well.

*Promising Again* takes the departure of children from the family as its entry into the broader question of renewing marriage when established modes of living together no longer work. The title also focuses on one of the series' themes: the paradox that all steady commitments are dynamic and ever changing. The centrality of change means that promises often cannot be kept in the way they were made, and sometimes "creative fidelity" requires breaking promises. Promising again can also mean making new commitments after death or divorce. David Hogue and Marie McCarthy, both professors of pastoral theology, bring to the book contrasting experiences of making promises—Hogue is in a second marriage and McCarthy is in a religious order.

The final book, coauthored by Freda A. Gardner, focuses on living

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alone after the death of a spouse. Yet this phase does not always follow in chronological order. Adults of all ages today may find themselves living in such a household. Anderson and Gardner cover the unique situations of those who live alone after divorce or death, those who have always lived alone, and those who live alone temporarily (e.g., during a long-distance relationship or the illness or imprisonment of a spouse). This careful exploration of the complex meaning of living alone is a welcome contribution to the series. As the book notes, living alone is likely for a variety of reasons to become more and more common. It is time to dispel the myth that those who live alone are unhappy, incomplete or irresponsible.

The series is grounded in at least two theoretical perspectives, mostly kept in the background: that of family systems theory, with occasional excursions into psychoanalytic understandings, and that of a pragmatic, practical approach to theology. The latter re-

ceives its best articulation in the second book where Anderson and Fite distinguish between a theology *of* and a theology *for* the family. For the most part, the books adopt the second approach. While the difference may seem slight, it rests on the assumption that theology, like the Sabbath, is made for people and not the reverse. A theology *for* marriage draws on themes in religious traditions (e.g., hospitality, justice, compassion, sacrifice, reconciliation, joy) that need not be specifically about marriage or taken from theologies *of* marriage. Scriptural and theological references that are conventionally part of theologies *of* marriage (e.g., Genesis 1-3, or Luther's ideas on the estate of marriage) are cited only as needed.

The authors are sensitive to gender and ethnic differences, while writing primarily from the perspective of middle-class, heterosexual, European-American culture. Though questions specific to gays and lesbians are seldom raised, several of the series' top-

ics pertain to people who are not heterosexual. All the volumes contain six chapters, with a common introduction modified for each book. The final volume concludes with an epilogue inviting readers to engage in further conversation on the contested demise and flourishing of families.

Parish ministers spend a great deal of time responding to families in crisis. The series can make a difference in the adequacy of those responses. The books would also make excellent gifts for people struggling with various transitions of life. Families in contemporary society, by virtue of their sheer complexity, are one of the few topics that deserve the attention of a full-fledged series. And when it comes to comprehending the delicate deliberations of family living, Anderson is one of the wisest people I know.

**The Disabled God: Towards a Liberatory Theology of Disability.**

*By Nancy L. Eiesland. Abingdon, 139 pp., \$13.95 paperback.*

**Waist-High in the World: A Life Among the Nondisabled.**

*By Nancy Mairs. Beacon, 212 pp., \$20.00.*

**M**AY YOU live until the word of your life is fully spoken." This benediction, which points to the importance of being heard, came to my mind while I was reading these books. Nancy Eiesland, whose doctoral work at Emory University was in ethics and society, writes out of her experience of lifelong disability. Her words call the church to be a body of justice for people with disabilities. Eiesland terms her theology "liberatory" and views the disabled as a minority group. By proposing an image of a disabled God, she offers a creative and redemptive response to the barriers which keep the disabled isolated and feeling responsible for their own condition.

Eiesland carefully prepares the

*Reviewed by Nancy Bauer-King, pastor of spiritual formation at Trinity United Methodist Church in Racine, Wisconsin.*

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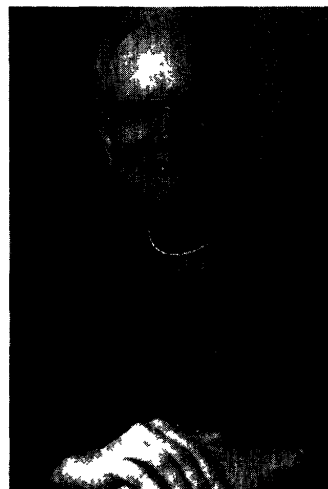
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