

Chapter IV

The Christian Family:

Change and Permanence

by

Henk C. VanDooren

Families are for Growing People

What is God's plan for the family? Well, in three presentations so far we have heard much about God's might and His grace in preserving the family, so I do not have to repeat what was said before. Let me just say that "Families are for growing people". Depending on whether you make "growing" a verb or an adjective, you will - either way - catch an aspect of what family is all about.

External Attack or Internal Decay

In this chapter we reflect on how things are different and how things are the same in the creational structure which we call the family. We could look at how the family has changed over time, and

could get into interesting discussions about the fact that the family today may be an endangered species. However, I feel that the family has always been under scrutiny for good and for bad. People, through sin, have always rebelled against giving of themselves without demanding "fair exchange". The "me generation" is not a twentieth century phenomenon. In fact, I find that in the secular world there is a new confidence in the family, and I could immediately give you a list of several books that would advocate putting more stock in the traditional family.¹

I would like to suggest that the biggest battle may not be in fighting the ways in which the world has tampered with family structures. It may be more important to talk about the endangerment of Christian families, where complacency has set in, and the generations do not always live in harmony. In looking over the walls, so wary of external attack, we may not be sufficiently aware of internal decay - what is happening inside the walls. Let's start with ourselves. In looking at ourselves we may need to consider how we have resisted certain changes for the wrong reasons.

It is worthwhile to approach the family from the perspective of three generations in terms of unique challenges for each generation, and the complementarity of the generations. The three generations I will talk about are adolescents, middle-agers, and the older generation. I have another way of describing this triad: Adolescence; Middle-essence; Obsolescence. At this time I have to apologize for the fact that much of my preoccupation is with the male side of the picture. Mothers and daughters will be getting short

¹ Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

Brigitte Berger and Peter Berger, *The War over the Family: Capturing the Middle Ground* (New York: Anchor Books, 1984).

Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life and the Culture of Dominishing Expectations* (New York: W.W.Norton, 1979).

Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-fulfilment in a World Turned Upside Down* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1981).

shrift this evening, I'm afraid. However, I promise not to abandon them completely.

When we talk about the family, we may also talk about the family of God - the Church. This is a living reality, and not an abstract concept. If our families are "not well", the family of God is also affected. Sometimes I find that when families are not able to sort out some of their own problems, they take it out on the minister or the elders of the Church. In my field this is called "projection". A dispute with the consistory might appear to be on a matter of doctrine, but it may actually be a symptom of something really wrong in the family. It is important for officebearers, then, to make proper distinctions, and to have the courage to probe underneath an apparent theological dispute to confront problems in the life of the family.

A Special Call for Each Generation

The dominant theme for this evening is that the Lord is faithful, and that He has a special calling for each generation. Each generation must make its own unique voyage. Any given stage anticipates a later voyage, and at the same time integrates what happened on the previous journey. It is clear, however, that it is artificial to examine one of the generations in isolation of the other. Just like the family is "greater than the sum of its parts", so any given generation lacks meaning when not considered in relation to the others. That is why I would like to refer to this as the "complementariness of the generations".

Whenever the Bible talks about the generations whether it be in the Old Testament (Prov. 3:1,2; 1:8; 13:24), or the New Testament (1 Cor. 11:3; 13; 2 Cor. 12:14), there is always a sense of balance and fine delicate tuning. At the same time there is a sense of sacredness - a treading on "Holy Ground", because the family is also used to depict the family of God. The commandments for husbands and

wives in Ephesians 5 form a foundational principle of "mutual servanthood" which applies to all members of the family.

Hard Work

If we are to know the wholeness and "shalom" of Jesus Christ in our relationships in our families we need to realize that this does not happen simply by itself. Such completeness and harmony comes because we have to work hard to produce it. Our marriages can be whole and complete if we work at them. Our relationships with our children can be wholesome and maturing if we all work at them. Such working needs to be a mutual effort in which we seek to complement and fulfil each other. Such a way of life can only be produced if we are dependent on the healing power of Christ. He transforms our disease and broken relationships by His loving power which makes all things new.

I feel strongly that the hard work that must go into "growing families" must not be roughshod as if the family is a hunk of equipment that needs to be straightened out from time to time. Nor should the family be approached as if it were an organization with a chief executive and a line of command. (I believe, though, that this is a favourite image among us.) I tend to agree more with Edith Schaeffer's metaphor of the family being like a garden.² Still, the most compelling image of all is what is evoked in the "family song" (Ps. 128:1-4), which describes the wife as a fruitful vine and the children as olive shoots. Do you picture it? The uniqueness of each member of the family - a separate plant or shoot - the rich soil filled with the nourishment of God's eternal promises; the pointing to the Head Gardener and Vine Dresser.

² Edith Schaeffer, *What is a Family?* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1975).

Troubled Families

It is important to realize, of course, that enough families, also in our circle, are run over by weeds and don't produce much growth. There are too many rocks and stones getting in the way. We cannot deny that there is much brokenness and disease. Some of you have come here tonight with terrible burdens of guilt and frustration - you may have been suffering from this totally on your own, and the shame of it all may have prevented you from seeking support and understanding from others in the communion of saints.

Since we will be thinking a lot about the generations tonight, it would be important to consider the sins that may have been committed by one generation on another. These sins may have been blocked, and sealed, and hidden in the ground. It may be that the tanks containing these hidden sins are no longer holding, and that the PCB's of past wrongs are seeping through the soil, and affecting our relationships in the present.

Because of the complementariness and inter-connectedness of the generations, the challenge of confronting the sin of the abuse of innocent victims will take on a different emphasis. The emphasis might not be on simply exposing the wrongdoing, but it might be very important to raise the question: "what are the dynamics that allow all of us to participate in keeping abuse hidden, and why are our 'spiritual health inspectors' not more engaged in providing direction on how to get rid of the toxic wastes seeping through?". Why is it difficult for us to acknowledge that abuse in the family is sin? This certainly is one area where change is required, and where we must call upon each other to maintain our families as havens of peace, rather than a prison of fear where women and children are oppressed by those who have betrayed trust. Don't say this doesn't happen among us - I know it does, and I am not making it up because it is the in-thing nowadays. The Bible is very clear in saying that abuse is sin:

Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts come iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. (Ps. 73:9 NIV)

I. ADOLESCENCE: LOOKING FOR THEIR PARENTS

The stage of development called adolescence has been romanticized too much. Some of you may have heard me before when I presented the idea that the notion of adolescence as a separate stage where the peer group has taken over and where the parents presumably have no influence, is an invention of parents who would like to have an excuse for abdicating responsibility. I am convinced that during adolescence the parents are in demand more than ever before. Dr. Visscher in his second address talked about the need for balance and avoiding the extremes of total enmeshment and total disengagement. It might be of interest to know that in my job as a family therapist I sometimes use questionnaires which can actually measure the degree of enmeshment and disengagement, and will also identify the preferences of family members in making changes.

I applied Olson's (1979) questionnaire³ to grade 12 students at Guido de Brès. This was done responsibly - all the answers were kept confidential. And I also applied it to a group of grade twelve students at a Public High School. The results were surprisingly similar. For both groups the families were perceived as rigid and disengaged. Both groups seemed to have the same idea of what they would like their families to be. Typically, they wanted less structure. However, what I did not count on was the fact that both groups wanted more closeness and connectedness in the family. I might

³ David Olson, D. Sprenkle, and C. Russell, "Circumplex Model of Marriage and Family Systems" *Family Process*, Vol. 18, pp 2-28, 1979

also mention that the sample of Guido students tended to be more satisfied with their families than the sample from the Public School.

I wanted to figure out what this meant, because the popular idea is that young people want to have not only a lot of freedom, but they also want to get away from their parents. I am drawing a conclusion that seeking closeness is a clear need for many young people today, but I am also wondering whether young people in looking for their parents are successful in finding them. I might insert here a comment about the fact that today's society certainly does not seem to value dependency on parents by their children. Instead the young people are openly encouraged to use public services such as their guidance counsellor, the public health nurse, or the therapist at the local mental health clinic. These professional people now are "standing in place of the parents".⁴

Parents need to be Available

I don't know whether parents are in hiding by default or by design. They are confused by the world of their adolescent son or daughter. That wouldn't be so bad in itself, but it also seems that many parents are too busy and too caught up with their own pursuits to be able to respond much to their children and satisfy their need for closeness. I am afraid that many parents only get close to their children when they face off for battle. In fact, in my experience as a family therapist I have noted many times that in families where the children act out severely this is an attempt to actually get close to one another. The challenge, then, is to give the family hope of finding a better way of getting close.

A powerful image of parents being available for their children is in Deuteronomy 6:6-8: "and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when your

⁴ "in loco parentis", James Dobson & Gary L. Bauer, *Children at Risk: the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of our Kids* (Vancouver, BC: Word Publishing, 1990).

rise". This is a relationship of walking, talking, sharing and telling. It is also the art of combining instruction with nurture. At some point the "show and tell" must come to an end as all good things will come to an end. The young person will go on his own -he or she will distance from the parental home. With the young man or young woman going on his or her own, it is not at all suggested that the parent stops being concerned. The parent is simply letting up but he never really lets go. The father also does not expect that his son or daughter will reconnoitre the path exactly the same way, but he will have some assurance that the basic guidelines will be followed.

We see here a process of walking and talking, nurturing and teaching. We see a pattern of modelling. What about the children whose parents were never there, or whose parents were there but only to work their own frustrations out on their children through abuse and brutalization which destroyed their spirit? The suggestion is that these unfortunate children will then have missed an opportunity of building trust. I believe that those young people who have suffered from a parent's excessive imposition and overcontrol also develop a spiritual agoraphobia (fear of open spaces). They never venture forth to experience God's World in its rich fullness. They may develop a type of dogmatism and black and white thinking which allows little room for the grace of God. The same attitude displays intolerance of others but also intolerance of self. Another way of describing such people is that they suffer from self hate. This restricts their ability to properly participate in mutual servanthood which is a basic requirement of Christian family life.

These children and these young people need special help sometime, but they also have a special promise through the mercies of our Lord.

We can only love because we are born out of love, we can only give because our life is a gift, and we can only make others free because we are set free by Him whose heart is greater than ours.

II. UP AND DOWN THE MOUNTAIN - MIDDLE-ESSENCE

"Middle-essence" is a new label I would like to use to describe the challenges of middle age. For some reason this phenomenon has almost replaced the fascination for adolescence. It may be that there are just a lot more middle agers, because they are the baby boomers who now have power in numbers, so their concerns occupy the agenda of the day. The preoccupation with the mid-life crisis (another term for middle-essence) tends to be individualistic and self centred with little bearing on the context of the family or the larger community, including the Church. According to worldly counsel, the resolution for the crisis then often lies within the person as he "comes to grips with himself", finds new value and self worth and goes on to take on new challenges.⁶

Conway (1984) has written a book called *Men in Mid-life Crisis*. This book has reached its nineteenth printing, so it has obviously become very popular and well read. The author suggests that we all need to stand alongside in support and encourage the man not to run from the process of the mid-life crisis, but rather to let the developmental process mature him and prepare him for the next phase of life. The predicament of the middle-ager is expressed in the following:

Middle-agers are beautiful!
aren't we, Lord?
I feel for us
too radical for our parents
too reactionary for our kids

supposedly in the prime of life
like prime rib
everybody eating off me
devouring me
nobody thanking me
appreciating me

⁶ see D. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York:Knopf, 1978)

but still hanging in there
 communicating with my parents
 in touch with my kids
 and getting more in touch with myself
 and that's all good
 thanks for making it good
 and
 could you make it a little better ⁶

When the middle age man successfully navigates the mid-life crisis, he will experience a mellowing and warming up which I would like to associate with "coming down the mountain". The point to be made is that coming down the mountain is often a lot more difficult than going up the mountain. "Going up the mountain" is the quest of the workaholic to get ahead, ostensibly to meet the needs of the family, but maybe more to provide a sense of achievement and identity, which elicits favour and respect from others.

The idea or the concept of the mid-life crisis is that it is after all a natural part and inevitable part for most of us. Maybe this is part of God's grace -to make us humble and turn to Him, so that when we come home to ourselves, by coming down the mountain, we also come home to Him. Sometimes it is through an external crisis that a father comes home. A son gets in trouble with the law; a daughter might be pregnant out of wedlock. In a strange way the crisis offers an *opportunity* for a second chance. Crises can be "hinges of time on which doors can open and close for the generations".⁷

Some time ago I suggested that in home visits we should emphasize the point of "absent fathers". This was not intended to mean only fathers who were not there because of work pressures, but also fathers who had not fully learned to be emotionally present for their family. I don't think this idea carried very far, and some of

⁶ Jim Conway, *Men in Mid-life Crisis* (Weston, ON: Cook Publ., 1984) p. 50.

⁷ Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985) p. 6.

my colleague elders thought the idea was probably a little silly. Maybe it hit too close to home for them. Maybe they found the topic of warning against "working mothers" much safer and more comfortable for themselves too, because it did not require them to reflect on possible changes they would have to make.

III. OBSOLESCENCE FOR THE UNTAPPED GENERATION

The study of the older generation is the most fascinating for me personally. I read a very interesting book called *Finding Our Fathers*.⁸ It is not a Christian book but it clearly makes the point that many men today have suffered from distant and sterile relationships with their fathers. These may be the men who as young people were searching but never found.

On a personal note, I may not have always found my father when I was young. He was my minister - a good minister, and I looked up to him and learned a lot from him. However, he was also climbing the mountain and there were many demands on him to climb the mountain. I believe I harboured anger at my father for not being there a lot more. Often what happens with the anger is that it can turn inward and cause you to get depressed and down on yourself. It can whittle away at your self-confidence. It can also come out in a direct attack and venting of anger which, although prescribed by some pop psychologists⁹, is not a formula that I would recommend. I think the anger began to settle when I started to discover my Dad as a person who had feelings and fears. Actually I began to realize that my father could be found in places I least expected, so I was able to reconstruct the times when I found him. These memories became important markers for me. You know

⁸ Samuel Osherson, *Finding Our Fathers: How Man's Life is Shaped by His Relationships with His Father* (New York:Fawcett Columbine,1986).

⁹ Susan Forward , *Toxic Parents: Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming your Life* (New York:BantamBooks,1989).

what is interesting? - all of these memories relate to instances when my Dad was able to show his vulnerability and humanness. That's when he could be down from the mountain.

I offer these personal disclosures to give hope and to point out the opportunity for all middle aged men who are looking for their fathers and who simply must keep looking. When they embark on this journey, it seems almost inevitable that the old guys will be there eagerly waiting. For when they may not have been there when you were young, they are there now as a resource to you. They are far from being obsolescent or being pushed over the hill. However, the really important matter is that when you find your father you also have to be able to forgive him for past neglect and omissions. Because if you can't forgive him, you can't forgive yourself and you won't be able to "be there" properly for your own children. When this process is completed, you have passed the grade into fully and graciously being able to "take care" of your aging parents, because you have yourself taken care of unfinished business. I will come back to the matter of care of the elderly a little later.

The Story of the Older Generation

I am fascinated by the older generation also as a group of people who have a common experience of having been through a war, a depression and an immigration. I am much indebted to Dr. Harry VanBelle who, as a Christian Developmentalist and Christian psychologist, made a study comparing three generations of Reformed Christians of Dutch background with the three generations in Holland. I don't have the time to go into detail, and unfortunately I can't point you to a reference because Dr. VanBelle's work has not yet found a publisher.

Let me just briefly share with you the story of this generation - even though you all probably know the story already. Now a story is always an account which is several steps removed from the actual event. Stories develop a certain flavour which is spiced by the

author's own way of thinking and feeling. So for a dyed in the wool scientist the story becomes questionable in terms of objectivity. But then who says that this has to be objective. We are, after all, engaged in an intensely personal and interpersonal discussion of the generations.

The story of the older generation is the story of a group of people who are currently quite secure financially. They are sometimes quite actively involved in giving financial help to their offspring to help with the high cost of Canadian Reformed living (church and school). Sometimes I wonder though whether money gets in the way of building closeness. The old generation feels at peace with itself, and feels it has been richly blessed by the Lord. It has endured trials and tribulations through settling in a new country. The love for Church and Reformed education goes deep, and it truly goes beyond any self aggrandizement. The old people truly see the proliferation of schools and churches as gifts of thankfulness to the Lord, and they are often confused and hurt by the fact that their children, the middle-escents, are not always equally enthusiastic and thankful.

Ambivalence about the Legacy

There seems to be some ambivalence with the middle-escents in relation to the legacy that their forebears have passed on through such hard sacrifice and determination. The next generation may have some misunderstanding about the institutions their parents established, because they have not seen this as part of coming down the mountain. Instead they may see it more as the efforts of the first generation to fend against outside influences - a means of self-preservation, rather than a response to claiming all of life for the Lord. They may see that the parents were more engaged in maintaining the form rather than the substance of bringing up our families in the ways of the Lord. I make no assumption that you will agree with my analysis, but I believe that the parents in middle years are sometimes at risk of polarizing themselves from their elders.

While the surface issue may be examining the institutions of our Reformed faith, the underlying issue may be the sense of personal faith and convictions which they struggle with through their own process of "coming down", and their perception of a lack of this quality in their parents.

It is important to clarify that this is a *perception*. It would be impertinent for me to suggest that the older generation were in fact under the influence of such a dichotomy. In actual fact the older generation, coming through the hardships of immigration, developed a keen child-like faith in God. They could trust Him because they felt so vulnerable so much of the time. However, they would often not display this vulnerability to their sons and daughters. At home they kept up a tough facade, but in the privacy of their bedrooms at night they would with heart, soul and mind throw themselves before the mercy seat of God. To their children they portrayed "living from the shoulders up", and maybe this came to be aligned with the "Reformed way" - don't show your emotions, keep problems to yourself.

I don't know if I am right in saying this, but it seems to me that a number of middle-agers are attracted to Evangelicalism, because that is where they detect much more of a "joy of faith", which they could not find with their parents. I am concerned about this for two reasons: (1) it may be a sign of middle-escents giving up on the older generation that let them down, and could not show their feelings (even though they were there); or (2) it may be a sign of a pampered and self centred generation which did not suffer a lot, had everything provided for them (including a fairly complete Christian education), and now want a quick emotional high in the easiest possible way. I want to mention that my wife and I a couple of weeks ago attended the "Toronto Conference on Reformed Theology" which addressed the topic of the *Goodness of God*. We were both deeply touched by the richness of the Reformed faith, and regretted that some of our friends who seem to be turning away from the Reformed faith could not have been there to experience the emotional high which we felt.

Not Walking Away from the Sources

What do the "normal" doubts about outward behaviour and inner convictions have to do with the relationship between the two generations. Well, I believe that if differences cannot be discussed openly and resentments and unresolved feelings are perpetuated, then there is a good chance that we will become alienated from each other. The older generation will be designated as obsolete and irrelevant. We still feel an obligation and Christian duty to take care of them, but we do it with much spitefulness. When this happens we lose the opportunity of having our parents as resources and support and vice versa. Or the support may only be given in a limited material way. The upshot of this is that if we middle-escents don't sort through some of the stuff with our parents, we restrict our own growth. The garden of the family - now in a broader sense - gets neglected by lack of pruning, weeding, and tilling, and honest hard work.

How do we get out of this dilemma? We get out of the dilemma by first recognizing that the problem may be in both generations. For the older generation (and this is a replay of what happens when we deal with an adolescent son or daughter) the matter is that it has to let up without letting go, to step back without walking out on a relationship. For the middle agers like myself it is a matter of picking up responsibility and walking forward into the world without walking away from one's sources.

Permanence and Change

What does all of this have to do with the topic of this evening - permanence and change. In the first place, there is a constant flow of growth and change between the generations - letting up. At the same time there is a firm constancy with respect to the Lord's promises which must never be let go. The striking thing is that when each generation works out its "stuff" it invariably needs the presence of the other generations to complete the task. Doing it in isolation only

gives way to the spirit of the times - individualism, and doing your own thing. The interdependence of the parts of the body which is so beautifully described in Scriptures (1 Cor. 12:14-26) is also the meshing of the generations.

There are a few areas where we may have become stuck in rigid thinking, and a way of approaching the issues that does not give enough room for interdependence and complementarity. I will list a few of the areas, as I see it, and then at the same time pin-point some issues that may be pursued in the discussion.

1. *Learning together*

The young shall teach the old, and they shall lead the parent by the hand without shame or sense of false pride. The older generation shall listen attentively to the meandering of the middle-agers when they talk about coming down the mountain. They will allow themselves the indulgence of sharing this experience vicariously, because they may not have had sufficient opportunity to do this in their own middle essence when, out of necessity (the immigration experience), there was still so much left to climb. In listening to the middle-agers, the older generation must provide space rather than close space. "Closing space" may result from the older generation making up for past missed opportunities. They try to assuage their guilt by quickly giving the admonishing words, and provide correction. This will, predictably, push the communication between the generations to a level of parent and little child, rather than an interchange between responsible and mature adults.

2. *Wives to make room*

While my own Mother had to work very hard to make a bit more room when my father "came home" to retire, this will have to be much more of a requirement for the middle generation. There will be a greater necessity for "stay at home fathers". The necessity was probably always there. Wives will have an

important role in teaching husbands how to stay home, but this may only be possible when they give up some of their power and control. I wonder often whether husbands who argue loud and long about headship are protesting too much, because their wives, at home, secretly have always been in full control. These husbands never were in charge and only exercised token leadership.

3. Balance of labour in the home

The idea that "families are for growing people" did not only apply to the raising of children, but also to continuing to seek opportunities for constant learning and change. Coming home husbands who are learning to be more available to the family and even accept some of the domestic responsibilities are not being "feminized". If we talk about "coming home husbands" we might also consider "going out wives". Now this is a very controversial subject among us, but I think it is high time that we dealt with this more openly and more honestly.

4. Underground work-force

We have a situation among us that constitutes an underground workforce of many wives and mothers taking care of other people's homes and other people's children in order to support the high cost of Reformed living.

The reason why it is underground is that there is a lot of shame attached to the fact that the wife is working outside the home, and others in the Church must not find out about it. This work is often necessary, but let's admit that it is not the most honouring. Besides, when Mother is finished with her underground labour she comes home to do the same thing all over again with her own family. The husband and the children have not been "liberated" enough to share in keeping the garden of the family cultivated.

5. *Women and meaningful work*

The negative impact of women working at meaningful jobs outside the home has been much mis-represented.¹⁰ When the factor of a working mother creates stress in the family often the following features are also at play:

- 1) the husbands don't pitch in;
- 2) the wives feel excessive guilt about working outside the home, and overcompensate by working themselves ragged on both fronts;
- 3) husbands and wife are strenuously involved in hiding the necessity of two wage earners from the Church community.

We are so quick to judge working women, and seldom delve deeply enough to understand that for some couples and for some families a working mother may be an excellent choice decided through much prayer and sense of responsibility. To suggest, immediately, that this is disrupting the creation order, blurring the roles, or denying headship is a rather large leap in logic.

Preparing our daughters

Having stuck my neck out anyway, I might as well take it a little further and suggest that we may need to take a different approach to how we prepare our daughters for future family-life. The first preparatory step may be to become established in a worthwhile career. Practically speaking this will mean that girls will postpone marriage for a few years, and then be able to re-enter careers when the family is able to be self functioning (which also implies that husbands take over some of the domestics).

Taking care of each other

In talking about the generations we recognize that the glue which keeps it all together is following the example of our Lord in His love

¹⁰ See Peter DeJong & Donald R. Wilson, *Husband and Wife: the Sexes in Scripture and Society* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979) p. 189.

and care for His people. But what about the "special care" which may be required when a parent becomes indigent. The Bible is very clear about the responsibility of children towards the parents. 1 Timothy 5:4 speaks directly to the subject: "If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some return to their parents for this is acceptable (pleasing) in the sight of God." In Mark 7:10-13 and Matthew 15:2-6, Jesus rebuked the person who put pious religious obligations ahead of duty to the parents. John's gospel records the powerful story of Jesus, while dying on the cross, commending his mother to the care of a beloved friend (John 19: 25-27). These are all part of what we refer to as "permanence" - part of the firm foundation provided for us.

That children have a duty to care for parents is mandated by God. However, there are no specific guidelines for how this should be done, and also how the wider community of the Church plays a role. I have already talked at some length about the preparatory work that is required for children to forgive parents for past hurt and neglect, so that they may give and may care without spitefulness. Part of caring for aging parents is helping them to prepare for death, and when we do this in the proper way we help ourselves to face life in greater fullness by the grace of God. In going through the process of helping to face death we may not have an example from how our parents did it with our grandparents, because they died in the "old country". The only experiences that stand out would be the fateful telegrams, often followed by quickly closing doors to hide the tears and the grief, and maybe also the guilt of not having been there. I do remember, though, very vivid accounts of how my Mother was able to "make it all right" at Oma's deathbed. The story of my Father praying a child's prayer with my dying uncle stands out very poignantly. It is very important to take the time to learn how our parents were able to deal with the grief of a passing generation, because it helps you to learn how best to be available to them, and then also be role models for your own children.

The care of the elderly falls firmly on the middle agers, and this comes at a difficult time when they themselves are in the throes of coming down the mountain, making sense of their own situation, and also contending with their own children. So many of the caregivers are "sandwiched" between two generations. A typical Sandwich Generation person is a 55 year old married female with children, who has an aging parent living less than an hour away. The question to be raised is why does this fall so much on the woman. Is this also not part of the domain and mandate of an adult son as it is of an adult daughter?

I am not that closely involved in the area of gerontology but I know this is a burgeoning field which also involves a variety of government programs. Our community has been shrewd in being able to work with governments to be able to obtain "bricks and mortar" to build homes for the aged and nursing homes. The question is whether we have done enough to look at what I call the "soft services" which includes looking at the people we employ to deal with our parents in a dignifying, respectful and Christian manner. There is also a significant area of in-home programs that we could tap as a Church community, and these programs might even be better alternatives to institutional programs. We have a lot of work ahead of us to strategize different ways of assisting the elderly in a way that complements the love and care provided by family. I'm hoping that it is all in place by the time I am old and infirm!

Conclusion

This chapter addressed the issue of "Change and Permanence". Approaching the challenge of change as "making new", one Christian writer¹¹ talked about "the renewing of the old and its radical reconditioning, so as to permit us to live in God's time and place and under His condition".

¹¹ William L. Hendricks, 1986, *A Theology of Aging* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985) p. 16.

John saw the panorama of change in the Apocalypse:

Behold I make all things new (Rev. 21:5).
He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and
death shall be no more, neither shall there be
mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the
former things have passed away (Rev. 21:4).

Things will change as part of God's eternal unchanging plan. But things will also stay the same. We have looked at and we have thought about the three generations. Maybe we have shed some tears about the missed opportunities for the three generations. God's Word is not restricted to three generations. It talks about the covenant lasting through a "thousand generations" (Ps. 105:8).

Tell it to your children, parents, so that they will tell it to their children yet unborn (see Ps. 78:6).

In the midst of all the pressures of life, the anxieties about whether we can make it through, the temptations of the world, we may still praise the Lord (with heart, soul and mind) that we have been chosen for eternal glory.

The best is yet to come!

RESPONSE BY MRS. MARGARET SPITHOFF

The speech we have just heard gives us a lot to think about and reflect on; in fact I am sure that you would like to hear it once again. Fortunately I have had the opportunity to read it beforehand. I would now like to respond.

At the beginning of his speech, Mr. VanDooren comments that instead of looking at the effect of the world around us on our families, he would like to concentrate on what should be happening inside our homes, on the relationships between the generations and the specific task each generation has. Our homes should be "havens of peace"; relationships between different generations in the home require continual "fine tuning".

Hard work indeed!

It definitely takes "hard work" to be the kind of parent God wants us to be. First of all, we must let our children know that we are glad that God gave them to us.

Furthermore, in order to build harmony, balance and respect in the home, we must talk with respect and politely with our children. In conflict situations we must be patient and calm. When we as parents have gone beyond the limits God has set for us, we must be willing to apologize. We must give our adolescent children an opportunity to express their feelings and then try to understand them.

Need to pray!

Conflicts in our homes can deteriorate so quickly. That is why I believe that it is so important to turn to God in prayer

every day again. We need to pray specifically for the difficulties which we encounter in dealing with each of our children. We also have to see what God has to say to us in His Word on the very practical matters of behaviour in our family.

Role of mother

While Mr. VanDooren spoke a lot about the role of the father in the family, I might point out that mothers probably still spend more time with the children and the burden of building an atmosphere of harmony weighs heavy on their shoulders. On several occasions we read in Proverbs, "Son, do not forsake your mother's teaching". We need to look at our time with our children as *opportunities* to continually point out the riches of God's love and promises and to show them the path they should follow in life. Family life has seen a lot of changes in our time; however, what God calls us to *be* as parents for our children and what He want us to *teach* them never changes.

Passing on the joy of faith

Mr. VanDooren, in speaking about "middle essence", talked about a time of much reflection about the task God has given us. We are sincerely asking ourselves, "Are we and have we been passing on to our children that 'joy of faith' in Christ?" I think that question has become so relevant because our older children are beginning to ask a lot of questions. They are also nearing the time when they will be leaving the parental home.

We are also "looking" and "listening" to the generation that went before us. For we need their help. We and our children need to hear that positive expression of God's faithfulness; how the Lord has worked in the lives of our parents or grandparents. That is very important in building a close relationship between the generations.

Unfinished business?

The speaker also mentioned dealing with "unfinished business"- e.g. reconciling past differences with elderly parents. That is also necessary in order to relate in a meaningful way with each other. As one becomes older the things of this world have no longer the same importance. The generations are then increasingly bound together by the bond of faith and the joy of being together in the service of the Lord.

Caring for our aging parents

I found interesting Mr. VanDooren's dialogue on observing how his parents dealt with the passing away of their loved ones across the ocean. Just as many of our parents never saw their parents reach old age, we have up to now rarely observed or been in a close relationship with some one who is aging. It is probably only in the last decade, that we have or have just begun to be in that situation of caring for our aging parents.

There are many books on the market on this subject and I would encourage anyone who is in this situation, whether faced with emotional stress or not, to read the book by Barbara Deane, *Caring for Your Aging Parents - when Love is Not Enough*.¹² It has been suggested that anyone approaching the age of the "elderly" should read this book to prepare oneself for that task of aging.

While the speaker talked about the "soft services" which included looking at the people we employ to deal with our parents, there is also the whole area where we as caregivers can prepare and equip ourselves for the task.

Permit me to read from Barbara Deane's book the following:

You may need to learn new ways of showing honour that are appropriate for this last stage of life - aging is a new

¹² (Colorado Springs, CO: Nav Press, 1989) p. 32 .

experience for both you and your partner. The process begins with trying to understand what your parents are going through. It goes on to accepting them as they are now and not as they were in the past. Along the way you may have to learn to give up your need to be in control of their aging.

Aging is their task, not yours. You can't do it for them, and much as you may like to, you can't spare them from the inevitable pain of the struggle. But you can stand with them as they go through it. Your presence says, "I care"; it says, "Your life has meaning and importance"; it says, "I love you; you are not alone".

Never underestimate the importance of your just being there with them.

Caring for the family of God

This also carries over into the broader family of God. We not only have to be available to help them, but we should also work on building relationships with the elderly who are often lonely. It takes effort on both sides but I believe that spending some of our time with them and opening up and sharing with them will have lasting rich rewards.

Women in the work force

I would also like to respond briefly to the part of the speech about women in the work force, and in particular the section on "preparing our daughter for the future family". Mr. VanDooren speaks of establishing a worthwhile career before marriage - a career which can be resumed when duties at home no longer require the mother to be at home full time.

I would like to voice my concerns here, concerns which others may also have. Will our daughters see their careers as secondary to their role of wife and mother if and when God guides their life that way? I believe that the Bible teaches that we have all been given talents which the Lord wants us to develop to the best of our ability. All through school, both boys and girls, are encouraged to do their best. If our daughters are capable, I think

that we can encourage them to get a higher education and train for a specific career.

However, I have also come to believe that we have to be diligent from early age on to teach and **show** our daughters what God teaches in His Word about a wife's and mother's role in God's creation and Church. In the texts referred to earlier in the letters to Timothy, it quite plainly outlines the role of the woman. She was created to be a helper to her husband; if she marries she is to have children - if the LORD so gives - and she is to manage her household. It should also be said that we need to instill in our children a love to do God's will and to know that the Bible, God's Word, is the final authority in every aspect of family life. Then, by the grace of God, our daughters too will want to do God's will in their life. They will know what God requires of them in their married life.

Lastly!

Picking a few issues from Mr. Van Dooren's speech and elaborating on them has been my personal choice. Many areas I have skipped - many are very personal and sensitive and speak for themselves. I thank him for the courage to bring them into the open.

Lastly, I wish to say that in all areas of our relationships between generations, we will often fail. We make mistakes and we sin. But we have a Saviour who forgives. He gave His life so that we can have life eternal through him.

DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

1. How does a father who is coming down the mountain connect with a twenty-three year old single son who lives nearby but is not interested in anything more than an infrequent and superficial relationship?

How do you deal with a child who shows no respect to the elders and has a rebellious attitude?

VanDooren: The first scenario was not really addressed in my presentation. I was more engrossed in working out the relationship between the middle aged person and the elderly parent, and assumed that when this is done well it will show a good example for the young generation. The idea of "coming down the mountain" in relation to the question suggests that the father is ready to "deal", while the son is not at all interested. It is not as if the father can simply say, "Son, I need to talk to you!". I know I was always suspicious when my Dad wanted to go for a car ride alone. I always knew there was a reason that he wanted to talk about the birds and the bees, and so fulfill his responsibility.

I think you cannot force the opportunities for dialogue between the generations - they have to be caught when they come your way. When you are coming down the mountain, you might not be as aware of the opportunities and catching them, because you are often preoccupied with your own sense of regret and your new resolve to make things better.

As to the child who shows no respect and a rebellious attitude, the approach taken depends very much on the child's age. The disrespect

that a lot of kids seem to display puts parents to a tremendous test. It is important to say to them that it is God's command that they love, honour, and obey their parents. Clearly the solution is not to clobber them, and I would not advise that for anyone. I don't know what a child is suggesting by being disrespectful, and I can often not fathom it myself. There might be certain things that we as parents have failed to do - it might be commission or omission, or that we don't show a good example. It is difficult to generalize. Parents are often tempted to pull out the higher authority, and it certainly is important to point out the obligations to our heavenly Father. There may also be something in the relationship that has not been right, and explain why the parent and the child are missing each other. That has to be looked at.

Spithoff: It takes a long time but you will get respect from the children when you respect them too. I firmly believe that - even if they transgress - we as parents should never show disrespect to them. We also have to be firm on insisting that they apologize and that we don't let them get away with it. It is not easy and it will perhaps happen again but we have to insist on an apology when they are disrespectful.

VanDooren: In terms of apologizing, that is a two-way street. I think as parents we often enough flip out and I think it is a wonderful example to our children when we can say, "Sorry, we did the wrong thing! We are sorry for that. I should not have said that, I should not have done that." That is very good role example for the children to follow.

2. *Your idea of a good wife and mother seems to be quite different from what Proverbs 31:10-31 teaches us. The family described in these verses was apparently not placed under stress by this lady's activities. On the contrary the family was praised.*

But then she was not pursuing a career for herself but all the things she did were for the advancement of family and husband.

VanDooren: We need to understand that whether we are working on a career as a husband or as a wife, this can never be an end in itself. We all need to live all our lives to the honour of God. We also need to use the talents that God has given us. I challenge the suggestion that career-ism for wives equates with selfishness and undermines the family.

In Proverbs 31 we have indeed a beautiful story of the complementarity which I tried to emphasize in the presentation. Often when you look at how two people "couple" - how they support each other, and complement each other - you notice many variations. When I visit my wife's farm relatives in Neerlandia, Alberta, I am intrigued with how the wife's role is beside her husband in sharing the labour, and often the physical labour as well. On top of that the farmer's wife makes the tea for the men, bakes the bread, etc. but it is not as if the men share in some of these more domestic chores. I don't know why we men have not been more liberated in this respect. I think we men are overly afraid of becoming "feminized". Does this say something about our own sense of security?

Comment from the floor: When you read the last chapter of Proverbs you will discover that in those days a wife and a mother had quite a job to do. Most of the chapter describes the business she is involved in - she was a very business-like woman! She was always very busy; in the summer for the winter and in the winter for the summer. But you don't read much about her husband. You almost get the impression in this chapter that *she* did *all* the work. All that was necessary to keep the family going. We should not forget that we live in a quite different situation. Taking care of a family does not take that much time anymore as in those days and in that society. Therefore when we

quote Proverbs 31 in this context we should always keep that in mind. Don't take it as an example for everyone today in our present circumstances.

3. My question concerns mothers in the middle age bracket. The children are in school or gone, the family is financially quite secure - should such mothers seek employment outside the home? With obligations, set hours and pay or should they fill their spare time with volunteer work, flexible hours. So much needs to be done in our community and in the world around us. There are lonely people everywhere. Please, comment!

VanDooren: Yes, there comes a time in the life of mothers that busy hands are not the order of the day anymore. Turning to opportunities to do volunteer work in the church community is wonderful. I don't know if we have developed a good way of encouraging that. It strikes me that mostly the same people offer the volunteer help - working among the sick and infirm. I know that in one of our larger churches, the deacons sent out a questionnaire soliciting what people might be willing to offer in the way of volunteer help. This was essentially a way of building up a talent bank. That is a wonderful approach, but I don't know how many really responded to the questionnaire. People often wait to be discovered, and are not aware of their gifts. A more concerted effort may need to be made to identify people, and bring them out.

Spithoff: I agree with what Mr. VanDooren said. That is the direction we should be going as wives and mothers when we have reached that time in our life that we don't have to look after our family anymore. We have some biblical examples that women were busy in many ways, also outside their own home. I think of I Timothy where it says that "no woman will be put on the list of widows unless she is not less than sixty years of age". Then Paul goes on saying, that she has been faithful to her hus-

band, well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, and helping those in trouble (I Tim. 5:9,10). This is just one example from the Bible - and there are more - that indeed it is pleasing to the Lord to serve each other, showing hospitality and helping those in trouble. Read also Acts 9:36-43.

4. It is easy for Mr. VanDooren to dismiss some of the Biblical arguments brought forward as to working mothers but I would like to hear some justification. On the practical side you even pointed out that parents need to be there, especially for adolescents. This obviously applies to younger children as well. I also appreciated Mrs. Spithoff's views on this. I would like to add the numerous possibilities for women within the communion of saints. For example, caring for others, visiting, helping widowers, elderly and assisting in the schools.

In the course of the four evenings of study we have come across the official position of the reformed believers and the reality of today's lifestyles. Is Mr. VanDooren's view of the mother who works at a career outside the home our official position or is it just the reality of today's society? Does that make the reality to agree with the Word of God?

Why is it that when a mother goes to work to teach our children in our schools it is considered to be OK but when she goes to work elsewhere she is looked down upon and this is not OK!

VanDooren: In the first place I want to say that it was not easy for me to say what I said because it is not a popular position in our circles. The reason why I spoke up was that I sense a level of denial in considering the consequences of the high cost of Canadian Reformed living. I exposed some of the contradiction by referring to

the "underground economy" where many women secretly work outside the home anyway. These people harbour a lot of guilt when they try to meet their financial obligations in this manner. By exposing this I hoped to generate more of an honest discussion, definitely in the light of Scriptures, and see how people try faithfully to balance things out in this day and age. That's also why I did a bit of research on the question whether dual income families has led to more social problems. In itself there seems to be no clear negative impact with both parents working. It is all a matter of how they work it out together. That is where we need to be careful not to judge when, in fact, a husband and wife as a team are able to balance work responsibilities with family responsibilities, do justice to the children, and honour God in the way they have ordered their lives. So, again, I am inviting more of an openness about this issue, and also see this (working mothers) as something that is happening already.

Spithoff: Mothers need to be there! We might as well face it, when fathers are in the consistory or have to fulfill other functions in church and school they are often gone. Sometimes also because of their daily work. If mothers in these circumstances would not be home or are busy at night, nobody is there for the children. I want to make clear that there are times and situations that a mother cannot be working and should not be working especially when the father because of his job will not be there.

I think that it also important *how* they are there. Mr. Van-Dooren mentioned that. That we are not just physically present but also that you are emotionally there and that you are willing to stop what you are doing, when they come with a question, not turning them off with the remark, "I'm too busy right now". Also that you are very open and receptive to them so that they know that whenever they need help with their schoolwork or have troubles that you are there for them and that you can deal with them immediately.

5. *If a strong family makes a strong church, does the obligation to the family come before the obligation to the church? Including the schools? My problem is that if money is needed for the school because it is good for the children to go to a christian school, but it is not good for the women to go to work, what do we do if the only way to meet our obligations is a working mother?*

VanDooren: One answer would be to suggest that the first church was also the family, and that also became the school. In looking at how it was in the beginning, everything seems to point back to the family. Drawing distinctions and deciding on different priorities becomes legalistic and would not be a productive way to go with this issue. We have to look at the three-fold cord of home, school and church, and how they are connected in a way that is similar to how I presented the inter-connectedness of the generations. We can talk about each generation separately, but it is best to see it inter-related. That's the way I prefer to approach this question.

Spithoff: In some of these things you can only relate to your own family. I do think that if you know as a mother that because of the stress of your work or simply lack of time you are not giving your children or husband the attention they need, then you really have to look at what you are doing and say is my work that important? I just have to forego on certain material things for there are also in the family priorities. I am not saying that a mother never should have work outside the home but you *have* to ask yourself, is my work hindering the family life here at home. If it is, you have to face that and do something about it. If you can look at your family and you can honestly say that everything is working properly, well then it is all right! But you do have to look at what God wants you to be as a wife to your husband and a parent for your children and then go from there.

Comment from the floor: Speaking about "working women", I would like to stress the responsibility which we have for each other within the communion of saints and the fellowship which we enjoy as members of the congregation of the Lord. We are related to each other "as members of one body", which also means that if one family finds out that they cannot meet their obligations to give the children the school education God wants them to have, then the rest of the household of God has the responsibility to pitch in and help out. The issue is not "to lay a quilt-trip" on those "working women" or perhaps on ourselves. The issue is that we are forcing some families to have a "working mother" because the funds are not available to assist them. And that is because part of the congregation does not understand their responsibility to help other Christians readily and cheerfully in having their children educated according to the doctrine of salvation taught in the church.

I just like to stress the responsibility of the *entire* community of believers to help making it possible to have both, a good home, and a good school full of children.

6. How can one develop more closeness and 'connectedness' in a christian family where adolescents need freedom and parents have a busy life?

VanDooren: One of the things I dislike about my own profession is that it often seems to suggest a "canned" approach to problems in the family. The advice is often to use a dash of self-help books, and a dash of counselling, and then members of the family will connect better and intimacy will result. I don't feel it is as easy as that. Also I don't think you can simply be told how to do it. There is also no single proven method that will work across all families. As I have said before, it is a matter of "catching". It is also a matter of time and having *enough* time. I remember Dr. Dobson challenging the idea of quality time, because quality time is not something that

you can fabricate. You can't say to a child "now come on John, I am going to spend some quality time with you", and then expect it to happen just like that. We need to *have* time and a good *quantity* of it where we can "catch" opportunities to be together and to be close. That might be a different kind of time for each of your children. With my son, for instance, the best time I can "catch" him is when he invites me to play tennis with him. How you catch each of your children differently is something you need to study carefully. What is so wonderful is that, in taking this approach, you also quickly discover how each of your children is uniquely and wonderfully made after God's image. That is already a tremendous challenge in itself, to *find* that uniqueness.

Spithoff: I agree with Mr. VanDooren when he says that each child is different. When they are adolescents they are in a somewhat restless stage of their life. They like to be involved in things and to do things and they don't seem to have time to talk with you. Sometimes I find the best time to talk with them is when they come home from school and they want a snack or something; so you are in the kitchen and you share something with them. Or also, before they go to bed. It is important "to be there!" You might just ask them, "How was your day in school?". It's often a matter of just "being there". And not that *you* always introduce the subjects; no, let *them* come up with whatever they like to talk about and just take time to respond.

But it is true, they are all different! Also in this respect that some of our children seem to want that closeness but others apparently don't want or need it. Maybe we will not even find out till they are older when they have gone through that stage whether there was that closeness or not.

7. *In your lecture you indicated that due to the rigid attitude of our reformed fathers their sons and daughters feel attracted to evangelical churches. Is the reformed faith as we confess it in-*

deed a valid reason to leave? Is it not very biblical and beautiful? Is it not because of the way some fathers practised this faith that children were attracted to other churches?

VanDooren: I agree wholeheartedly! The point I was trying to make was that the issue is a matter of the relationship which failed to demonstrate to the middle essence, as I called it, the fact that parents have feelings too. That is why I made the point that somehow in terms of public appearance they lived "from the shoulders up" and often that is all what the kids saw. And yet they suffered through the agony of immigration and they were very much aware of their dependency on the LORD every way they turned. That was really the point I was trying to make.

As to people turning to evangelicalism, I guess that is just sort of my theory of that being related to something the children could not see, although it was perhaps very much present. And perhaps there is still time to do that! Just as this father expressed that there is a tremendous joy and beauty in our reformed doctrine. There is just no question about it. But to *live* this beauty so that our children may *see* it is a more difficult thing.

8. *Mr. VanDooren, you said that a middle-aged man must come to reconciliation with his father and forgive him for "not being there". If this does not happen you suggest that the middle-aged man will not have a proper relationship with his children. Please, explain! Does this mean that a man who cannot be reconciled to his father cannot be a good father himself?*

VanDooren: What I often experience working with people who had horrible things happen in their lives is, that you then discover that you actually are trying to help them to live with a very serious limp and yet they must go on. You also find out that there are situations of horrendous proportions where it is ex-

tremely difficult to ever forgive. I don't know whether the LORD even would be displeased with that; it is sometimes "in this present world" just not humanly possible to do that. And maybe then we have to be satisfied with knowing that this will be sorted out in the life hereafter.

The question whether that would affect you in terms of your own parenting, I think it would, and for that reason I think people need very special consideration and help. It may be a spouse who may need to extend herself or himself to help the better half in order to enable him/her to keep on top of a major hurt, which still has a lot of influence in that person's life.

The idea of forgiveness is a very personal thing too; it is a process which we need to acknowledge and which will take its own course. Sometimes I find that people are too quick and too ready to *demand* forgiveness. This is often not something which you can put into a time frame. It sure is a tremendous blessing when people can forgive. But some can never forgive!

9. It was stated that when we come home to ourselves we also come home to Christ. Please, explain further. Is this view of the self-image and self-love Biblical?

VanDooren: We know that there is such a thing as biblical self-love. We may love ourselves because God loved us so very much that He sent us His only Son. "Love you neighbour as *yourself*."

I think what I was trying to say in my talk was that there seems to be a sort of "natural process" which we go through to find out that after we have achieved everything and we seem to be on top of the mountain, we still have missed certain parts and we need to go down again. That may be the LORD's way of teaching us humility; that worldly success and sort of "being on

top" is not where it's at! That may just be one of the ways in which we sort of wake up and come to our senses!

10. When being confronted with certain responsibilities older people will often respond by saying "I had my time". Is this a christian attitude?

Another related question: what role do grandparents have in the family?

Spithoff: I might be wrong, but this question has to do with what was discussed in a high school meeting. Indeed it happens that parents who no longer have children in high school don't contribute anymore. When approached about it they say: "I have had my time!" I don't think that is the way to go since it is not a christian attitude. Often they are in an even better position to help than before. If that is the case, then it is their duty within the communion of saints to continue supporting the education of the covenant children. And to do that "readily and cheerfully"!

As to the other question: about the role of grandparents in the family, I will let Mr. VanDooren answer that one.

VanDooren: I think grandparents are there to tell stories! I really do! In fact I think we as parents should tell more stories to our children, about ourselves, our experiences - not in a self-glorifying way. But just what it was like, how it was for us as children and how we reacted to situations. I remember that I as a boy was sitting on the steps of the stair just outside the living room, while my parents were having company. My Dad would talk about his war experiences. I remember very clearly how I was in fact kind of angry that he had never told us those stories himself. I think this is something to keep in mind as parents and as grandparents. Children have a need to know! You can't organize it! It is the walking and the talking and the telling! It is the

quantity time which has to be there for those kind of things. It is not just a question of grandparents dropping by - then the kid has to perform, has to listen. It is finding those occasions of spending time with each other and beginning to tell the stories.

Rev. G. VanDooren: I think you can say it with one word: grandparents should be *available!* I don't think it is wise that grandparents meddle in the life of the families of their children. If you meddle in what they do in their family or tell them what you would like them to do, it might so easily give the impression that you are interfering. Stay away from all that!

However, *you should always be available!* Not only available in listening and telling stories but also available with your purse, wallet and bankbook!

11. Could you comment on some specific ways in which the permanence of our home and faith-life can help us deal with the ever accelerating rate of change outside of that circle.

Spithoff: I just want to say that this actually was my question. Rev. Agema in his response said that there were too many social activities available for our children. Having our children participating in all these activities is hindering a healthy family-life. I have an active family and like them to be involved in things of church and school (and sports). It does indeed to some extent interfere with many aspects of our family-life. I am wondering on the other hand whether it is not good for them to be involved in those things. Maybe someone can comment on that.

VanDooren: By grace we do accept the structure of family-life. And adhering to this structure in terms of the boundaries between parents and children certainly presents a message towards the world where everything seems to go. There often the

roles are reversed so that the kids are telling the parents what to do. In fact parents are asking the kids what they should do, involving them in major decisions. I think that this has had a tremendous impact on many children.

Not that long ago I read a book about the stress on kids who are being what in the book is called "*parentified*". Parents urge the kids to tell the parents what to do and want them to be concerned and involved in their parental problems. Maintaining the structure of the family and the boundaries in the relation between parents and children is an aspect of permanence and extremely important. With all the fluidity and changes around us it is something people are beginning to attend to. There is a real concern about returning to the family as a "haven" in an arduous world. Another problem is that so many of the functions of the family have been taken over by services. When there is trouble in the family you go and see a therapist. And I don't want to talk myself out of a job, but we better face it; this is the trend: go to your guidance counselor, go to your health nurse... Rather than empowering families to sort out their own problems or find help in the family among relatives or within the Family, the church as communion of saints.

Comment from the floor: An aspect of permanence of the family could be sitting together as family in church and not scattered over the whole auditorium. Also eating meals together rather than haphazardly and quickly taking a bite. Eating together is also having fellowship together, talking, listening to each other and together to the Bible and praying together. Also these practical things could help to keep up the permanence of the family in a changing world.

VanDooren: I wholeheartedly agree with that! I like to sit with my 'olive branches' in the pew in church on Sunday. It is

interesting though how often we take this family structure for granted. I don't know myself whether this is indeed a big problem among us. It seems to me that also in this respect our tradition is continuing (meals together and Bible reading and praying together). When I mention this to my colleagues who come from other traditions they often think it to be "neat" and a marvelous "ritual", as one called it. Saying this I just wish to enforce what you were saying. We should not let that togetherness slip away. The world may call it a ritual, for us it is a lot more than that! It is a certain constancy and permanency which is extremely important in an ever changing society.