BLACK SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS AND SINGLE PARENTHOOD

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Introduction

This chapter will explore the status and impact of African-American single-parent households in this country and within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the context of results from a nationwide study of African-American Seventh-day Adventist single-parent households. Particular emphasis will be given to the challenges and needs of these families along with the role of the church in responding to these needs. Finally, a single-parent family agenda for the church will be proposed.

The Single-Parent Family

Society continues to be challenged by the enigma of single-parent families and the effects these families have on the lives of children. How do we respond to the needs of single-parent families, as well as develop strategies to reduce the growing numbers of such families?

In the past single-parent families resulted most often from wars, natural disasters, and other calamities that separated adult males from their families.[1] Today, however, most single-parent families result from out-of-wedlock births, separation, and divorce. Regardless of the cause, single-parent households have long been recognized as a major cause of school failure, family poverty, and juvenile delinquency,[2] problems that intensify as the numbers of single-parent families increase.

The United States leads all other industrialized nations in the number of single-parent families.[3] In the United States one out of every two children will spend a portion of their childhood in a single-parent home.[4] The percentage of children in the United States living in single-parent homes increased from 9 percent in 1960 to 24 percent in 1986.[5] The 1990 census reported that between 1980 and 1990, single-parent homes headed by females increased 35.6 percent and homes headed by males increased 29.1 percent.

These unsettling data underline the need to move beyond mere rhetorical responses to a realization that we are facing a national epidemic that demands a concerted and aggressive response. While single-parent families seem to be an inevitable occurrence in society, the negative impact of such families can be minimized if federal and state government agencies, private foundations, special-interest groups, community volunteers, and churches band together to respond to the crisis.

The family has long been accepted as the backbone of society: if the family weakens, then society crumbles. That dysfunctional families create a dysfunctional society has been well established in the studies of social analysts.[6] Of particular concern, then, is the disproportionate representation of African-American single-parent families.

African-American Single-Parent Households

In 1988 African-American single-parent families comprised approximately 80 percent of households living in poverty, according to the Bureau of the Census. During that same time period nearly 50 percent of all children living in poverty were African-American. Entering the nineties, more than 50 percent of all African-American families were headed by single females.[7] Single parenting undermines the economic potential of a family while depriving children of economic, educational, and community resources, all of which undermines their chances of future success.[8] Considering these outcomes, the future of the African-American family and its community appears grim.

I. Gellineau and others suggest that the current status of African-American families is the continuation and result of specific strategies designed to seize and maintain control over the Black race. Since our introduction to American soil, African-American families have been ripped apart and manipulated by outside forces that, perhaps fearing the strength they observed in African families, were seeking to maintain slavery and domination.

According to Gellineau, the first step in achieving such domination was to break up families. Slave fathers were often sold off, leaving the mother to carry on, which set in place a cycle of poverty, low self-esteem, meager provisions, and educational failure that has continued throughout history. Certainly African-American families today remain vulnerable to the dismal outcomes related to household breakup.

Single-Parent Households and the SDA Church

Single parents (especially African-American single parents) often rely on churches or clergy as coping strategies.[9] Unfortunately, however, many individuals report increased

stress and disappointment with how churches responded to their needs as single parents.[10]

This disappointment can perhaps be explained by the tendency for churches to limit their assistance to single-parent families in their particular congregation. Single parents are hesitant to express their needs to fellow church members because (1) they fear public exposure of their personal business and (2) they wish to avoid being pitied. This leads the church to respond inadequately, because its response is based on the person's expressed needs rather than his/her actual needs. Consequently, single parents who rely on the church as a coping mechanism experience frustration and increased stress because of the church's response.

When churches work independently of other agencies or with a limited population, a limited perspective of single-parent family needs is maintained, resulting in inadequate response to the problem. The church has an essential role in addressing the needs of single-parent families. However, these needs cannot be adequately addressed without fully understanding the problem.

According to Ellen G. White, "the first work of Christians is to be united in the family."[11] She also notes that "the more closely the members of a family are united in their work in the home, the more uplifting and helpful will be the influence . . . outside the home."[12] "A well-ordered Christian household is a powerful argument in favor of the reality of the Christian religion."[13] "The family tie is the closest, most tender and sacred, of any on earth."[14]

In these quotes Ellen White speaks to the importance of the family in maintaining a relationship to Christ. The family was designed as a blessing to humankind. However, "family" has taken on a different meaning for many Seventh-day Adventists in general and African-American Adventists in particular.

One reason that the church has been slow to respond to the dilemma of single-parent families is the lack of substantive documentation. For this study a nationwide survey was conducted to determine the status of single-parent families among African-Americans in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

A packet of 20 surveys and a letter describing the study were mailed to church clerks of all churches in the regional conferences. Each clerk was asked to distribute the surveys to single parents in their church. The single parents were instructed to seal their completed surveys in the envelope provided and return them to the clerk the following week. Each clerk was provided a large, self-addressed, stamped envelope to return surveys to the investigator. For informational and support purposes, pastors received a copy of the survey and a cover letter. They were also asked to encourage single parents to respond.

Approximately 500 surveys were returned, 394 of which were usable. Given the distribution procedures, an accurate return rate could not be determined. Nonetheless, the data from this survey closely align with data already reported in the literature. While caution must be exercised, one might conclude that the respondents of this study are representative of the larger population.

Demographically, our respondent group was comprised primarily of females. However, there were 18 male respondents. The average length of time as a single parent was 10.5 years. Most of the respondents (52 percent) were single parents as the result of divorce. The never-married category comprised 31 percent of the respondents. Education achieved ranged from seventh grade to the doctoral level, and the mean level achieved was the twelfth grade. The majority of the respondents (55 percent) lived in rented property. As children the majority of these respondents (60 percent) did not live in single-parent homes.

The average number of children for respondents was two, constituting 328 males and 347 females. The average age of the children was 10 years old, and parents reported that the majority of these children were faithful members of the SDA Church. Forty-eight children were reported as having a specific disability.

Chart 1 displays the responses to the question "How often do your children see/visit the absent parent?" The majority of the responses (78 percent) ranged between "never" and "sometimes."

Chart 1
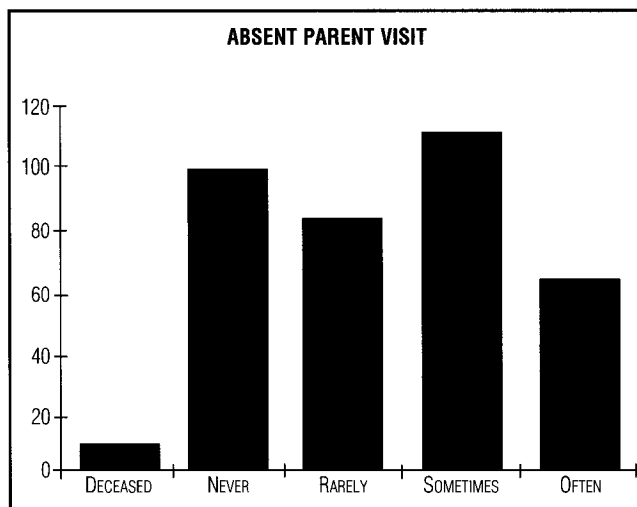
Charts 2 and 3 display graphically the age and income ranges of African-American single-parent families who completed this survey. The majority of the respondents were primarily between 36 and 45 years old, and the majority of these earned less than $10,000 a year. While the age range data differs slightly, the income data reported in this

study parallel perfectly the 1990 census data on marital status and living arrangements.
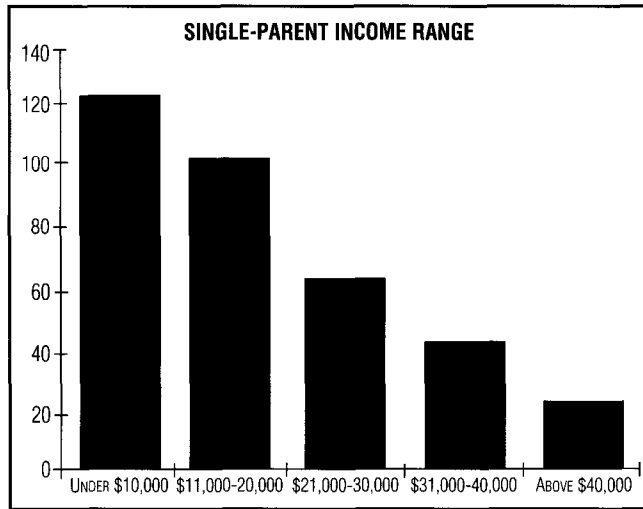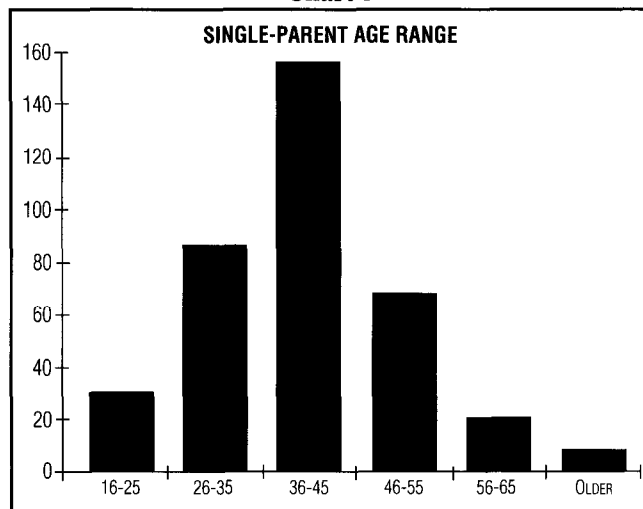
Chart 2

SINGLE-PARENT INCOME RANGE

Chart 3

SINGLE-PARENT AGE RANGE

Many consider ages 36-45 as the prime years for establishing socioeconomic stability.[15] By this time adults have completed all educational pursuits, established seniority in the workplace, and begun to stabilize their families. Poverty can greatly undermine the achievement of these common life goals, and the majority of the single parents in our survey live in poverty. As a result, single parents experience less educational achievement and more unstable employment and family life. Some argue that it is difficult to assist persons who are needy yet in the prime wage-earning years—which may help explain why churches often do not respond to the financial needs of single-parent households.

Negative Consequences

Lower educational attainment. Among the effects of single-parent households on children, the most prevalent outcome is the diminished educational attainment of children. The dropout rate of children from single-parent homes is almost double that of children from two-parent homes.[16] This high dropout rate may be because single parents are less likely to live in neighborhoods that promote educational achievement, their children are less likely to associate with other children who have positive attitudes toward education, and single-parent families tend to be more mobile.[17]

Low self-esteem. The greatest factor, however, is the effect of low self-esteem on the child's educational achievement. Children from single-parent families have less self-esteem than children from two-parent families.[18] They struggle with their worth as a person and sometimes feel abandoned and rejected, much like the divorced single parent.

Children of single parents suffer more from low self-esteem because single parents themselves suffer more from low self-esteem. It is difficult to feel good about yourself when you feel like a failure. If a parent is not confident in his/her abilities, it is unlikely the child will be confident. Single parents who responded to the survey reported low self-esteem as one of their greatest challenges, indicating a need for consistent support and encouragement of African-American children from SDA single-parent homes.

The self-esteem of African-American children in particular is crucial to their success in school. Gerardi states that for African-American students, self-esteem is a better predictor of school achievement than IQ scores.[19] It is no wonder that African-American children of single-parent homes experience significant failure in school.

Emotional trauma. Children of single-parent homes tend to suffer more from depression, anger, and guilt.[20] They often bear emotional scars that leave them frightened and consumed with feelings of alienation. The younger the child, the more adjustment problems the child will experience.[21] Younger children also tend to withdraw, while older children tend to be more aggressive.

Gender effects. Males tend to be more handicapped by divorce, need more attention, perform more poorly in school, and take twice as long to adjust, which often leads to alcohol and drug use.[22] Males are often concerned about their mother's ability to protect the family, and inadvertently place themselves in the role of family protector. This can cause extreme challenges for the healthy development of a young male, given the magnitude of responsibility inherent in protecting the family.

Females feel the impact of economic insecurity more, have difficulty maintaining positive relationships with males, and tend to seek inappropriate ways to get attention from males.[23] Often the "daddy's girl" stage, established at

a young age, is missed when fathers are absent from the home, causing girls from single-parent homes to yearn for male attention more than girls from two-parent families.[24]

To summarize, children of single-parent families experience more educational failure, lower self-esteem, increased adjustment problems, and less community involvement, leading to dependent individuals who create negative cycles that can last for generations. These individuals will soon comprise the majority of SDA Church membership. As a church we can choose to counterbalance the effects of single-parenting on the lives of children now or find ourselves constantly reacting. Someone once said, "It is easier to build children than to repair men."

Positive Consequences

Much has been written about the negative effects of single-parenting on children. Following are several positive aspects, as communicated by single parents with whom I have interacted over the years.

Individual tenacity. Children of single-parent families are often strong, able to deal with disappointment, and are not as quick to give up in the face of adversity. Perhaps this is because they must make so many adjustments. They learn the art of survival via daily experiences.

Faith in God. Children from single-parent homes seem to learn valuable lessons that produce strong faith at an early age. Depending on the spiritual condition of the single parent, many children learn very early how to depend on God.

Personal accountability. Exposed earlier to home-care responsibilities, children of single-parent homes acquire money-management skills well beyond their years. It is not unusual for a 10-year-old to prepare dinner on a daily basis or take care of younger siblings for extended periods of time. While some may view this negatively, these children learn skills that many of their counterparts learn much later in life, if at all, allowing them to adequately address similar challenges in adulthood.

Familial bonds. Finally, children from single-parent homes tend to have stronger familial bonds, resulting perhaps from a sense of having to stick together in order to make it. These children are more protective of one another and the parent with whom they live.

These positive aspects of children from single-parent families can be maximized with consistent and appropriate support for the children and their single parent.

Challenges of African-American Single Parents in the SDA Church

Each respondent to the survey was asked to rank his/her greatest challenges as a single parent. Chart 4 shows their responses.

Chart 4

SINGLE-PARENT CHALLENGES
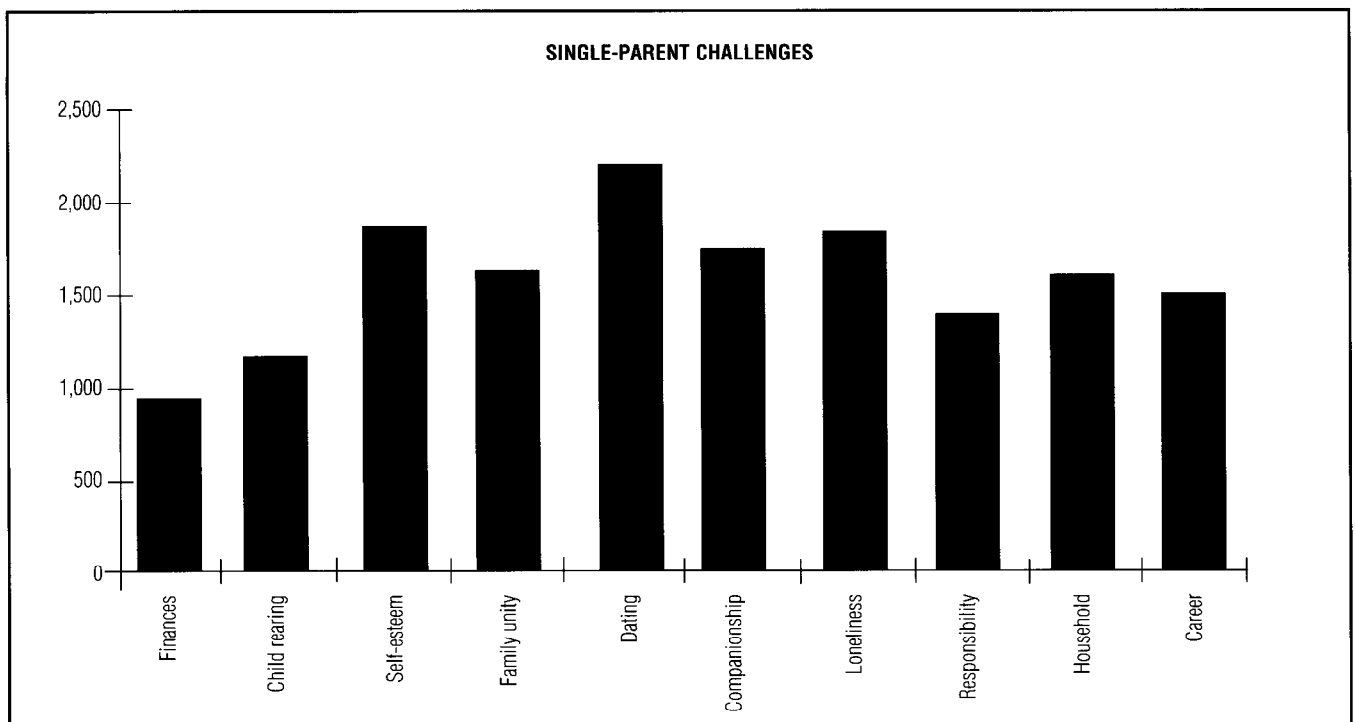
Loneliness. Respondents to this survey see dating as their greatest challenge. Many single parents struggle with whether or not they should date, and if they choose to date, the effect their dating may have on their children. Influencing the desire to date was loneliness and the need for adult companionship, which constituted the second and third greatest challenges of single-parenting.

If other avenues for companionship are provided on a regular basis, perhaps dating would not be of primary concern to single-parent respondents. Single parents may not necessarily be looking for a date, but rather wholesome adult friendship and fellowship. Church singles organizations assist in providing opportunities for companionship, but they are usually made up of young, never-married, childless individuals who have a difficult time relating to single parents.

Finance. The respondents in this survey ranked finances as the least among the 11 challenges listed, which represents an interesting paradox. The financial challenge of single-parenting is well documented. Does this mean that the respondents are not challenged by finances to the degree they are challenged by other factors? Probably not, since the majority of the respondents reported their income as being below $10,000. Perhaps the respondents from this study have simply accepted the inevitable condition of "poverty" as a single parent and have consciously chosen to focus on challenges they feel they can address adequately.

Child rearing. The low ranking of child rearing is also surprising. This response warrants concern that African-American single parents who responded to this survey may not be aware of the negative effects of single-parenting on children, or they may be unable to address the problems that arise from growing up in a single-parent home.

It is difficult to understand what it is like to live in a single-parent home if you have not experienced that as a child. I am reminded of the lesson my daughter taught me regarding her experiences in our single-parent home. I was trying to help her understand that her father loved her even if he didn't respond in ways she wanted and needed. Noting her frustration, I told her I understood how she felt. She looked at me with tears in her eyes and said, "No, you don't. You can't understand what I am feeling, because you have never lived in a single-parent home."

Given that the majority of respondents did not come from single-parent homes, it is likely that they do not fully understand what their children need for healthy development in a single-parent home. Single parents must be aware of the effects of single-parenting on children, especially male children.

Another concern has to do with what appears to be a pattern in responses—the highest-ranked challenges relate directly to the well-being of the single parent (i.e., self-es-teem, loneliness, companionship, etc.); the lower rankings are challenges that do not necessarily undermine the personal well-being of the single parent (i.e., finances, child rearing). This may indicate that single parents in our survey are more concerned about their own well-being. While the well-being of the single parent is crucial, caution must be taken to ensure that the needs of children are not neglected.

Finally, the low rating of child rearing as a challenge may imply that single parents are comfortable rearing children alone. As a society we tend to buy into the fallacy that mothers primarily rear children; therefore, single-parenting is nothing really new. However, research consistently documents the importance of two parents to share in the work of child rearing. This is God's plan, and when that is not possible, God has charged the church to respond.

The problems of single-parenting are exacerbated during particular times of the year. Respondents were asked to identify their most difficult time of the year as a single parent. Most indicated that the winter holidays (Christmas, etc.) were the most difficult because they reminded them of their "incomplete" families and increased their desire to be a "complete" family. (Single-parent families can be complete if God is the head. However, society as a whole tends to refer to single-parent homes as incomplete.)

Respondents reported that the winter holidays also resulted in increased despondency and thoughts of suicide. This time of year brings an increase in financial and work responsibilities. Increased heating bills, Christmas shopping, and other expenses were noted as major stress factors. Holidays in general were noted as difficult periods for single parents and their children.

On the other hand, the survey respondents were asked to identify their greatest joy in being single parents. Following are a few representative statements:

1. "My children and I are safe and free."
2. "I am able to teach my children about Jesus without a fight."
3. "There is no confusion."
4. "It is peaceful."
5. "I have learned to depend totally on God."
6. "I am more focused on God."
7. "My child and I are growing together."
8. "My children and I are very close."
9. "Realizing I can handle responsibility is great."
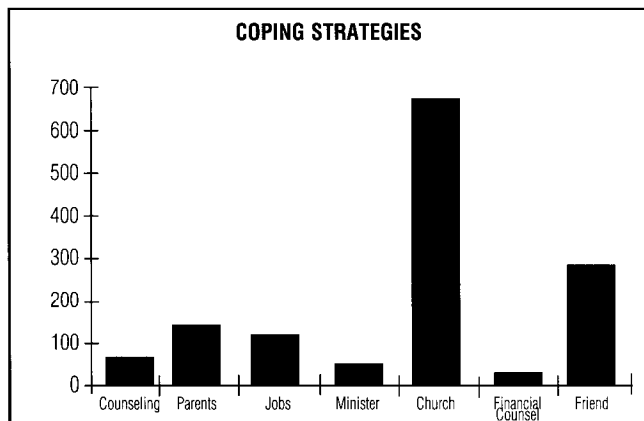10. "I am achieving against the odds."

The majority of the responses that referenced positive aspects of single-parenting mentioned child rearing prominently. The second most emphasized relationship in this type of response referenced God, and the third was a peaceful homelife. Several respondents stated that there was *no* joy in being a single parent. Those individuals who are able to identify some positives amid so

many negatives are probably using a myriad of effective coping strategies.

Coping Strategies

Respondents were asked to check the coping strategies they have utilized as single parents. Chart 5 shows that the number one coping strategy is the "church." The second most used strategy is confiding in a friend. Turning to the church for strength and guidance is comforting; however, the response of the church to the needs of single parents, according to survey respondents, has been disappointing.

Chart 5

COPING STRATEGIES

(Bar chart titled "COPING STRATEGIES" with y-axis ranging from 0 to 700 in increments of 100. X-axis categories: Counseling, Parents, Jobs, Minister, Church, Financial Counsel, Friend. Church has the tallest bar at approximately 680, Friend approximately 290, Parents approximately 140, Jobs approximately 110.)

When asked to evaluate the effectiveness of various strategies used, respondents reported that the church was the most disappointing. Churches were not interested, would not give of their time, and participated extensively in gossip. Why the lack of appropriate church support? First, many SDA churches have a difficult time accepting the deluge of single-parent families. Because the church has been slow to acknowledge the magnitude of the problem, appropriate responses are lacking. In addition, many churches claim a lack of understanding of the needs of single parents.

Single parents often tire of having to ask people for assistance, so they retreat in hopes that someone will perceive their need without them having to ask. Unfortunately, many churches are not able to perceive the needs without being directly informed. As churches embrace single-parent families, they will come to understand the needs. Until that time, single parents and churches have to be willing to come together, talk about the needs, and work collectively to respond to those needs.

The primary needs of single parents in the SDA Church are for encouragement and acceptance. The following comments epitomized this need:

1. "I just want the church to treat my children as members."

2. "Just be there and offer support."
3. "Don't offer support, then charge me."
4. "Just listen to me."
5. "Recognize I am a part of the family of God too."
6. "Don't judge me."
7. "Don't assume I am man hungry."
8. "Don't make me feel so ashamed of being a single parent."
9. "Don't pity us or make us feel like second-class members."
10. "Accept me as a whole person, even if I don't have a husband."

These statements are reflective of SDA single parents. Unfortunately, many single parents are not able to recover from the rejection they feel from their church and leave. This might explain in part why most of the respondents on this survey reported that they relied more on non-Adventist friends as confidants.

The needs of single parents in the church present a tremendous opportunity for ministry, but we must first understand ways we as a church can help. Chart 6 displays additional data from single parents who were asked to rank ways the church can help. These ranged from providing house repair services to establishing support groups. Note that financial support is not among the top five suggestions, helping to dispel the myth that single parents just want a handout.

As stated earlier in this chapter, most single parents do not want others to "take care of them." Rather they are in need of occasional support, most often in the form of donated time or minimal services such as house and car repair. Single parents often feel overwhelmed by their daily challenges. Having a day to themselves or being invited to another family's home for dinner would go a long way in supporting the single-parent family. The suggestions in this survey would take little effort, but would make a tremendous impact.

Following is an agenda for the church as it responds to the needs of single-parent families. While applicable to all single-parent families, this agenda is particularly important for African-American SDAs and may be implemented at various levels within the church.

**An Urgent Appeal for Church Support
for Single-Parent Families**
A. *General Conference, Division, Union, and Local Conferences*
   1. Conduct research on Adventist single-parent families (the more we know, the more we are able to deal with the problem).
   2. Publish articles, materials, magazines, and books to help single-parent families (these should include information on parenting skills, strategies, and support networks from a Christian perspective).

Chart 6

HOW CHURCHES CAN HELP
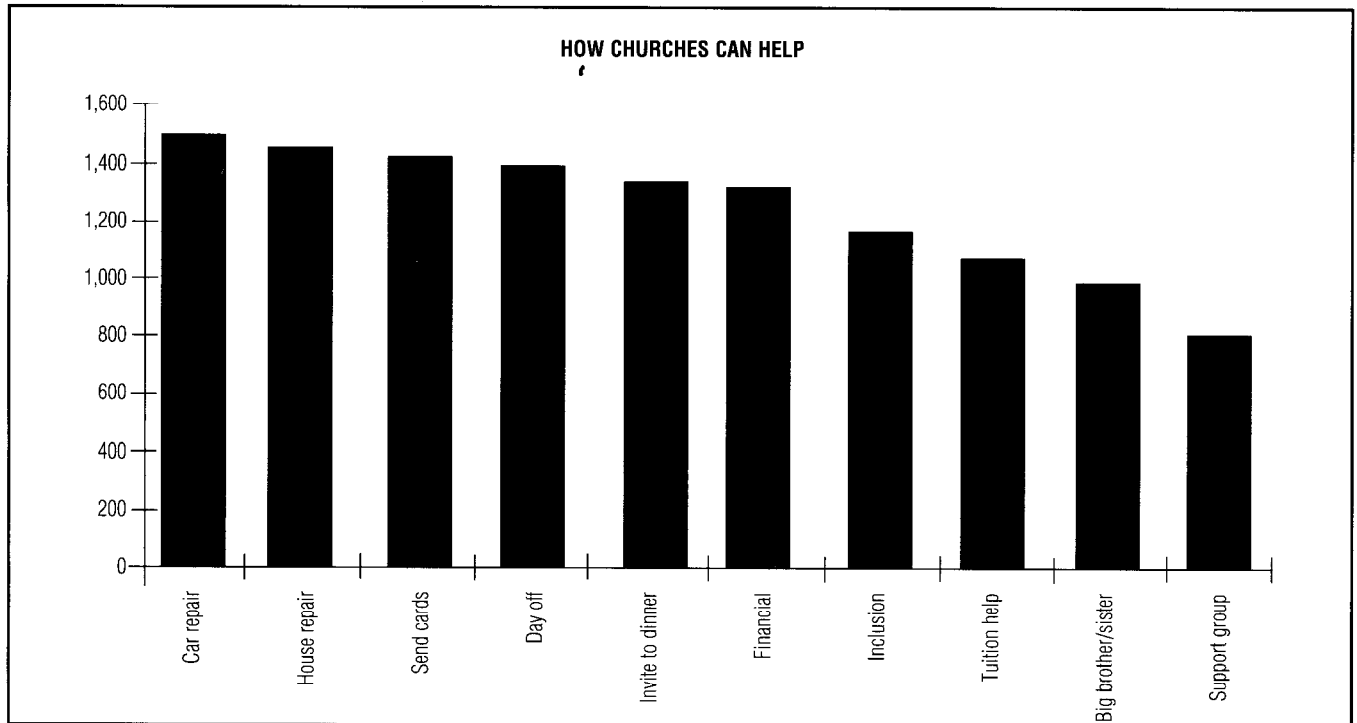
3. Allocate funds for camps, retreats, and seminars on parenting (single parents need "retooling" opportunities but can rarely afford the luxury).

4. Provide financial help to students from single-parent families attending Adventist schools (many parents in our survey expressed frustration about wanting their children to attend Adventist schools but not being able to afford the cost; many felt a Christian education would help minimize the negative effects of single-parenting).

5. Encourage the church family to support the single-parent family (church laypersons gain from their pastors and administrators priorities for action within the church community).

B. *The Local Church*

1. Organize enrichment programs for single-parent families.

2. Establish support groups.

3. Plan recreational activities for parents and children of single-parent families.

4. Organize help for unexpected emergencies such as car problems.

5. Host a "fix-it" day (single parents bring their cars and/or appliances to the church parking lot for simple repairs by church members).

6. Assist with child care (baby-sitting, etc.).

7. Organize a coparenting program (parents in the church are on call and available to assist single parents with tough parenting problems).

8. Establish a big brother/sister program.

9. Preach truth, not opinion (many single parents are condemned weekly by sermons steeped in personal opinion versus Bible principles).

10. Remember birthdays and holidays (establish a committee to send single parents flowers, cards, etc.).

11. Facilitate a conducive environment (often insensitive things are said and done that are devastating to single-parent families, such as father/son campouts or mother/daughter banquets; also, asking children to stand up in church and give their father a hug on Father's Day may present an awkward situation for children).

12. Listen, pray, and act!

While implementing the above suggestions can help improve relationships between the church and single-parent families, single parents must also help themselves. Many tend to wallow in their pain, but they must move forward for the well-being of their children. As quickly as possible the single parent must also create a stable homelife by (1) maintaining a daily routine, (2) allowing children to remain children, and (3) converting minuses into pluses. Single parents must learn to look out for and assist one another, to exchange responsibilities, to develop support groups, and to engage socially without strings attached.

The challenges faced by African-American single parents and their families can be best addressed by persons who understand the challenges of being African-American. We as a people have historically enjoyed strong familial bonds. Our efforts to support one another have kept us strong. Our foundation was constructed on the belief that "it takes an entire community to raise a child." We have always taken responsibility for our own, and to ignore that call now is to ignore who we are as a people.

We are family, connected and strengthened by a common bond that has mystified others for generations. Millions have struggled to understand that deep bond. However, we betray that bond when we do not respond to the needs that threaten the stability of our "family." The African-American SDA Church has a mission that cannot be accomplished by anyone else but themselves.

We can make a difference in the lives of single-parent families. It has been said that the church is slow to respond to the needs of single parents because the church is not in touch with reality. I wonder if it is not more relevant to say that we are not *in* touch because we are not willing *to* touch. To get intimately involved with others is truly the work of Christ.

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[2] S. McLanahan and G. Sandefur, *Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[3] Burns and Scott.

[4] I. Garfinkel and S. McLanahan, *Single Mothers and Their Children: A New American Dilemma* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 1989).

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[6] Debra Friedman, *Towards a Structure of Indifference: The Social Origins of Maternal Custody* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter Publishers, 1995).

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[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

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[15] Elizabeth Mulroy, *The New Uprooted: Single Mothers in Urban Life* (Westport, Conn.: Auburn House Pub., 1995).

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