

## **5. CHAPTER FIVE: CLERGY WHO DIVORCED**

### **5.1 A CASE STUDY OF VOLKSKERK VAN AFRIKA (PEOPLE'S CHURCH OF AFRICA) CLERGY WHO DIVORCED.**

#### **5.1.1 THE STORY OF THE BENFRED FAMILY (PSEUDOMYN/FICTIOUS FAMILY NAME ATTACHED TO THE TRUE EXPERIENCE)**

As mentioned in the introduction, the author grew up on a farm where communities were closely knitted together. The author was raised in a family which believed that married life is sacred and ordained by God. The author was also taught that whoever was married in our community should be highly revered because they are the custodians of married life. The Benfred family was no exception on the rule. This family was one of the model families and was widely respected in our denomination. Today, I am also an ordained minister but still respect this particular minister and his ex-wife because they are human beings, made in the image of God (Imago Dei).

The experience of this family is shared so that the reader may understand why the Volkskerk failed to minister to them. The Volkskerk church's conservative theology makes it impossible to care for the clergy family. For many years, there was this perfect picture of this perfect pastoral family. Throughout their married life of many years, there was never any sign of trouble or distress

evident in their marriage as it seems from the outside. Here was a pastoral family on face value happily married without any sign of marital problems. Then the news broke: The Benfred family has filed for divorce. The researcher could not understand what was happening to this once happy pastoral family which was held in high esteem by members of the author's denomination. The reader will be aware how the expectation of the churches on pastoral families made people to react negatively instead of responding to their pastoral needs. The researcher could not understand this phenomenon. To the researcher, divorce was an unnatural phenomenon which impacts negatively on family life. Clergy are supposed to be the reflection of God and should be the protectors of married life. Conservative theology plays a role in getting to the heart of the problem. The author was brought up with these kinds of values. This is how the researcher and community understand the sacredness of matrimony. The researcher and the whole denomination were struck helpless by this divorce and thus, entered the stage of denial. The researcher realizes now that they were not only in shock but they were actually traumatized by the divorce of one of their senior ministers. What complicated the matter further was that there was no policy in place to deal with the matter at hand. Looking back now, the author realizes how traumatic this occurrence has been for the pastor and his family. Not only had the divorce surrounded them with great shock,

they were traumatized by this tragic act of divorce, which left them helpless. What actually struck the author's mum, is the fact that our denomination has formulated a "policy" to deal with this particular minister without realizing what sort of trauma this minister and his family has endured due to the divorce, and with little knowledge and concern for the conditions which give rise for the divorce in the first place. What is actually sad is that the church, which the author belongs to, has no pastoral manual guide pertaining to divorce; especially clergy (pastoral) divorce. After a couple of years of suspension, the author's denomination suddenly decided to bring this particular minister back to the ordained ministry without any pastoral care guidance in place. It has never prepared the local parishes of our denomination beforehand of the return of this particular minister to the fulltime ordain ministry. However, the misunderstanding towards divorce, particularly the divorce of this minister and his family, is still evident in our denomination. The author has for a long time observed the pain and humiliation this minister has endured at the hands of many of our congregation members. No congregation in our denomination deems him fit to be called to serve them. Now at retirement age and with no congregation and no income, the author realizes that the divorce has severely damaged this minister as well as his family. What

bothers the author the most is that our denomination is completely helpless pertaining to divorce and this particular incident is no exception.

This tragic story of the Benfred family has haunted me ever since it occurred and now I am researching on it in order to find some ways to care for individuals, especially pastoral families, in order to deal and endure the unnatural onslaught of the divorce phenomenon. I am also sure it had an impact in moving me to study the science of Practical Theology which deals, particularly, with such issues.

### **5.1.2 AUTHOR'S REFLECTION ON ABOVE STORY**

In looking back on this tragic experience of my colleague and friend, it sends shivers through my body now that I really understand the impact thereof.

Practical theology, as a science, has helped me to understand and unpacked the impact of a traumatic event such divorce. I realize now how traumatic divorce would have been for this particular pastoral family. Barnett helps us to understand the impact of post traumatic stress disorder on individuals when she says, "post traumatic stress disorder is an anxiety disorder produced by an extremely stressful event" (1997: 217). Every time when there is a discussion concerning the past divorce of my colleague, the pain of that occurrence is written all over his face. It is as if he relives the stressful event of his past divorce all over again. However, the author realized how this story confronts

the church's pastoral capabilities. The question is thus, how does the church (denomination) care for pastoral families who were traumatized by the onslaught of divorce? When tracing back this tragic occurrence of years ago, the author realized how important shepherding as a method of caring is of great need to the church. The author realized that through the happening of divorce, the affected pastoral family as well as the local parish, need therapy and guidance from the denomination-as the shepherd of the flock. The author is deeply aware of the onslaught of divorce in our post-modern age. Divorce does not only tear families apart but has infiltrated the parsonage with devastating consequences. Wimberley is correct when he says that, "clergy families are not immune to the ravage and trauma of unseen events (such as divorce) and the difficult task of managing our lives in their aftermath" (2007: 135). Thus, individuals exposed and traumatized by divorce need a therapist who cares; especially the family. The emphasis in this chapter is on the pastoral family, the local parish and the denomination as a whole. Pastoral families who go through divorce are in special need of pastoral care. Gerkin rightly says that, "pastoral care needs to have as its primary focus the care of all God's people through the ups and downs of everyday life, the engendering of caring environments within which all people can grow and develop to their fullest potential" (1997: 88). Mageza connects beautifully when he says that,

“pastoral care means to ‘accompany’, to ‘walk with’, to ‘travel with’” (2005: 219). Thus, many people need the help and support of an understanding and caring shepherd, who is prepared to accompany, to walk with them, to travel with them in time of distress or whatever challenge, and the assurance that God is with them in their time of desolation. In this instance, the denomination of the V.V.A (P.C.A) is actually the shepherd and the pastoral family is the people who need nurture in their time of trauma. The author is aware that they have failed from this role. The Apostle Paul emphasizes the great importance of the comforting shepherd when he proclaims in 2 Corinthians that, “blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God” (1: 3-4). When confronted with experiences such as our story under discussion, Gerkin is valuable when he says that, “the pastor is the caring shepherd of the flock of Christ” (1997: 80). This is, indeed, a great expectation from the V.V.A (P.C.A) as a denomination, especially during tragic times. It is important to note that people need care and nurture all the time; especially individuals exposed to the onslaught of the divorce phenomenon. When looking back, the author realized the devastating impact that this particular incident had on the pastor per se, not to mention the wife,

children, local congregation and the community at large. The author realizes now that there was no pastoral intervention from the church and, in the end, the family was further traumatized. As colleagues, we had observed the unfolding of the whole event, but it was in fact a new problem for us, hence we were paralyzed. The author asked, “Is it because of the lack of information on how to shepherd in instances of divorce?” This act clearly shows that Practical Theology, as a specialized science, and more so that trauma counseling is of the utmost importance towards shepherding the flock of Christ. The caring shepherd (denomination) needs to understand the background to each situation if the church is to effectively help and council those who go through divorce. Gerkin’s shepherding method is helpful because the focus is not only on those who must endure divorce but it also includes the wider family and the community at large. Thus, to care for the traumatized individuals (family), the people affected need a sensitive ear and deep understanding from the denomination per se. When we, as a denomination, listen to these traumatic stories and reflect on them, the church, as shepherd, starts working therapeutically on the experiences of those individuals who are traumatized by divorce; a role the author should have expected from our denomination during the time of the divorce of the pastoral family. Thus, when the denomination, as the caring shepherd, listens to these stories, it starts to

care for the family by being present in their distress. It is for this reason that Taylor says that, “a shepherd guides the flock to good pastures and safe resting places. He (sic) leads the sheep and provide for all their needs, seeing that they have water to drink and keeping the shepherd fold in good repair. He guides his flock and protects it from wild animals, thieves, or other danger, even when this involves danger to the shepherd self” (1995: 9). The author wants to agree with Taylor because he, himself, hails from a village deep in the rural parts of South Africa, in the Southern Cape. The author was a shepherd boy and thus, understands the task of looking after the sheep. To be a shepherd means to take care of the needy and distressed especially families, and in this thesis, the author refers to pastoral families who are on the receiving end of the divorce phenomenon. To be a shepherd of God’s flock, means taking a deep and sincere interest in the welfare of the flock and of each individual sheep in the flock. The pastor, his/her spouse and the family belongs to the sheepfold of God. It is the duty of our denomination to take care of each one in the sheepfold and work with them in such a way that healing occurs. When shepherding people, especially pastoral families traumatized by divorce, it is the denomination’s duty to take special care of all involved; pastoral family, local parish and community where the affected family resides. It is important that the Volkskerk Van Afrika (People’s Church of Africa) creates a community

that will focus on caring for clergy families. This will become a supporting structure of caring for the sheep. Wimberley is, thus, correct when he says that, “our sense of who we are is forged in relationship to God through conversation, not just directly with God but also with friends, family and caring professionals. Whether through the empathy offered through pastoral counseling or caring friends and family, God is present offering God’s grace. And God can be counted on especially during difficult times” (2003: 65).

Wimberley articulates what the author needs to share because Christ, who is ever present in times of pain and suffering, has entrusted the care of His flock to the church and He bids the church, His body, to have the same interest that He has manifested. This is the sacred responsibility of the charge that He has entrusted to them. God has commanded the church to strengthen the weak, to revive the fainting, and to shield the sheep from devouring wolves; especially pastoral families who are traumatized by divorce. The pastoral family needs gentle, caring and understanding support and encouragement as they go through the crisis of coming to grips with their situation. Collins sees the church and its Christian life as, “not as a solo experience, marked by rugged individualism and make it on your own mentality, but as the central nerve of care” (1993: 197). Thus, when one suffers in the sheepfold, every member of the church carries the suffering together with the family. The above quotation

helps the denomination of the V.V.A (P.C.A) to care for God's flock; especially in cases like our story under discussion. Thus, it includes pastoral therapy and council, which is important to shepherding and leadership in God's vineyard. A caring church is a proactive church which reads between the lines when there are signs of a marriage in trouble. A proactive church will also prevent such traumatic events long before it happens. The church of Christ has been purchased with the blood of Christ, and every shepherd (here the denomination) should realize that the sheep under its care cost an infinite sacrifice. Everyone, especially the pastoral family, should be regarded as priceless worth and the church should be unwearied in its effort to keep them in a healthy condition. Shepherding means taking a deep and personal interest in the wellbeing of all God's people, especially those who must endure the pain of divorce. Jesus rightly says in John that, "I am the good Shepherd. The good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the Good Shepherd. I know My own and My own know Me" (10: 11-14). To save His sheep, Christ laid down His own life, and He points His shepherds to the love thus manifested, as their example. The church of Christ has been

purchased with His blood, and therefore every shepherd should realize that the sheep under his/her care cost an infinite sacrifice. Thus, the denomination of the V.V. (P.C.A) should regard each sheep in the sheepfold as of priceless worth and should be unwearied in its effort to keep them in a healthy, flourishing condition. The church that walks in the footprints of Christ will follow Jesus' self-denying example and constantly labour for the well being of those who suffer because of the divorce phenomenon. If the denomination of the V.V. (P.C.A) sees themselves as true pastoral caregivers, they will be prepared to 'accompany', to 'walk with', to 'travel with' (Mangeza 2005: 291) those individuals who succumb under the heavy burden of divorce.

In the next section, the author will propose a model which will be of help to the V.V.A (P.C.A) when dealing with pastoral (clergy) divorce because, at present, there are no guidelines governing this phenomenon in our denomination.

## **5.2 PROPOSE MODEL OF CARE ON HOW TO HANDLE THE PASTORAL FAMILY WHEN THEY ARE CONFRONTED WITH DIVORCE IN THE VOLKSKERK VAN AFRIKA (PEOPLE'S CHURCH OF AFRICA)**

Because there is no manual on how to handle pastoral divorce in the V.V.A (P.C.A), the author is of the opinion that the following guidelines will be of

great help to our denomination, when it is confronted with the issue of clergy divorce.

- The particular minister to present his/her marital case to the district Superintendent (Chairperson). This person must be someone with a high degree of integrity, honesty and can keep confidentiality;
- The Superintendent convenes a pastoral discussion with the pastor and his/her spouse in order to ascertain him/herself of the background of the situation at hand;
- From here, the case is reported to the pastoral committee which deals with incidences such as divorce. However, these committee members must also be people of a high degree of integrity and should understand the divorce process and the traumatic impact thereof. This committee should consist of not more than seven members (balanced of laity and clergy, women included);
- The first priority of this committee should be to work towards offering healing between those individuals involved. However, if the situation is irreconcilable, the denomination should

compassionately journey with the couple and help them to come to grips with the imminent divorce. As mentioned earlier, there was no pastoral intervention program in place pertaining to the divorce of my colleague and friend. Thus, pastoral care for the pastor, his/her family and the local church, is of the utmost importance. This committee should report to Presbytery and could have a synod committee;

- It is also important that the denomination put guidelines in place, in case of a suspension, so that the particular minister could know how long the suspension would last. If there is a suspension, the committee must ensure that spiritual guidance is assigned to the pastor and his/her family in order to journey with them in their time of distress. There must also be a clear set of rules, which spells out how and when the minister will be back in the ordained ministry of the church. It is also worth mentioning that the author's denomination has no standard manual pertaining to disciplinary laws and thus, this manual needs attention in order to be able to offer pastoral care, especially to pastoral families;

- The committee must also spell out clearly that after the completion of suspension, the particular minister is ready to return to the ordained ministry. However, all parishes in the denomination should be prepared, beforehand, of the minister's return to make it easy for him/her to take up his/her duty again;
- Workshops on how to strengthen marriage and keep it in a healthy and flourishing way, should be a regular phenomenon in our church; especially for new ministers who want to enter the ordained ministry through the V.V.A (P.C.A);
- Marriage enrichment retreats for pastors and their families should be an annual programme on the denomination's yearly calendar.

This model can be expanded into a standard manual which deal specifically with marriage, divorce and remarriage in the VVA (PCA) after an in-depth study of the manuals of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in South Africa and the Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa guidelines, which will be examined and set out in chapter six. The section: Pastoral (clergy) divorce: What is the responsibility of the denomination also in above mentioned chapter, will

further enhance the establishment of this committee for the author's denomination.

### **5.3 PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, the author has presented a story pertaining to the traumatic experience of divorce within a pastoral family in the Volkskerk van Afrika (People's Church of Africa). The author has given the reader some insight into the traumatic experience of a particular family.

The author has further guided the reader into the art of pastoral care and how the denomination of the V.V.A (P.C.A) can apply this method in the lives of those exposed to the divorce phenomenon. The chapter highlighted the fact that the denomination of the V.V. (P.C.A) is, in fact, the shepherd pastor and it emphasizes the important role the church plays in the lives of the people of God. The author has highlighted the fact that the pastoral family belongs to the family of God.

The author has also proposed a model of care to the V.V.A (P.C.A) on how to handle the pastoral family when they are confronted with the onslaught of divorce. Pastoral care models are suggested as a way of dealing with caring ministry within the VVA (PCA).

In the next chapter, the author will explore and discuss other denominations pastoral care manuals, in order to incorporate some of their elements in order to create a model for the V.V.A (P.C.A). The author will also make recommendations to denominational officials in order to give them insight and resources to make their marriages as happy and healthy as possible. The author also discusses what the responsibility of the denomination is, when divorce strikes the parsonage. The author will also suggest how to handle divorce in pastoral families. Recruitment and training will also feature prominently, in this chapter. The author also discusses the journey forward for the clergy and how to keep love alive.