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Family and Community Fabric

Multiple reasons are in front of many nonprofits and ministry organizations to discuss what is meant by *family*. The purpose is not to fight how the larger culture defines or re-defines understandings of *marriage*, *family* and *household*, but to leap frog over the culture and help re-build the fabric the makes for a civil-tongued, neighborly and safe society.

The most strident among the progressives push for new definitions and greater tolerance of those who have been marginalized, even as they marginalize those they think oppose them. The most contentious among the conservatives push for maintaining what seemed to work well for them in the past, demonizing those they believe are harming their preferred world. Both groups seem immune from intellectual rigor, and both groups contribute to the growing inability to disagree respectfully.

In the spirit of trying to ignite a better, healthier and more constructive conversation, may we suggest two elements that need to be acknowledged by all parties?

1. Families change—constantly—and this is normal. Two exercises from my own family help to make the point. The first was when our children had become teenagers. We figured out how long other people had lived in our home with us and how much time it had just been the four of us. Our surprise was that the amount of time shared with former college roommates, grandparents, siblings and unwed mothers was the greater of the two. The second was one I completed recently, tracking all the different family configurations I have lived in during my 50 years on earth. The two longest were the 13 years in my home of origin with my parents and siblings, and the 16 years with my wife, children and our various extended stay house guests. That leaves a lot of years given to other household configurations, and the possibility that the one in which I will live the longest has not yet begun. This is a great variety considering that my parents remain married to their first spouses as do I.

2. Families are held together by sacrificial commitment not by consumerism. The throw it away approach is clearly in the water we are drinking when it comes to dealing with relationship and responsibility irritations. This is a far cry from the covenant, sacrifice and grit it takes to build anything of meaning and lasting value. *As long as we both shall love* is a promise to abandon rather than a commitment, the front, back and side door of the relationship rather than an escape hatch.

Conversation around these two elements might open the way once more to so order our lives that our pledge is to give and serve rather than take and consume and toss.

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