

AN OVERVIEW

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Joy examines the church as a caring community against the background of the need to encourage society as a whole to be more caring.

The biblical view of man at each stage of his development is outlined. Ways in which the individual gifts of church members can be utilized are explored. The corporate influence the church can have in local, national and international contexts is examined. And the example it can provide as a society of redeemed people, without barriers of race, sex or class, is set forth as 'the greatest testimony to Christ's continued presence in the world'.

The need for a caring Christian community demonstrating Christ's new society has never been greater than at present. It has been apparent for some time that the welfare state is creaking at the seams, that the expectations it raised were never matched by resources, and indeed were incapable of fulfilment in any case. In a reaction against the stigma of the poor house and the receipt of public assistance, the doctrine of universal provision seemed to offer a new chance of separating poverty and illness from loss of human dignity, and improved health and education—the hope of a more equal society. Unfortunately, the harsh questions about priorities and boundaries were never properly debated or defined.

A time of economic cutback always heralds a discussion of such topics, and recent years have been no exception. However, priorities in health and welfare are notoriously difficult to determine, and it is rarely that the most vulnerable and inarticulate are adequately protected. Political considerations, vested interests and a genuine concern for the damage sometimes caused by the unintended outcomes of intervention, often combine to undermine logical decision-making, and a tendency to inertia tempers change.

Neither the welfare state nor the occupational groups employed in it can match demand, or bear the total responsibility for caring. Emphasis is once again being put on voluntary help and community care. On reflection, few of the voluntary organizations would wish to go back to the patchy provision, overlap and confusion which in the last century led to the formation of the Charity Organization Society, and it is clear that society as a whole does not want to see an erosion of welfare benefits and a deterioration in standards of care.

Community care

Community care is a panacea proposed every decade or so, and adopted or rejected mainly on ideological and political grounds; implementation is always patchy rather than based on a well thought-out and integrated strategy. For example, institutions founded as a necessary and enlightened provision for the ill and indigent, tend to become static and inward looking, and their administrations complacent or resentful, as society loses interest when problems are removed from sight. In due course, therefore, institutions may become a symbol of repressiveness and reaction, and institutionalization diagnosed as a sickness in its own right. The call goes up to liberate the inmates, and return them to the community. Sadly, warnings that this can only be successful if adequate domiciliary and other services are provided, and that there will always be a function for highly skilled residential care go unheeded; returning people to the community too often means returning them to unsupported and hard-pressed relatives, or to no care at all, thereby increasing the risk of breakdown. It can also lead to the indiscriminate closure of residential institutions as community and voluntary efforts are seen as cheap alternatives to them. The result is that resources are not committed to provide the services needed to help mentally and physically handicapped children and adults, and deprived families, to live as normal a life as possible, or to give young people opportunities and relationships which for some of them might prevent a delinquent career. In many instances, the caring community is a myth, as many of the old networks of extended families and small close knit groups have been eroded, as job mobility and unemployment led to anonymity, isolation and homelessness, and in many places such a community never existed at all.

The problem is very rarely financial, though frequently perceived to be such. Successive governments fail to curb public expenditure in real terms, whatever their philosophy and public stance, as savings and cuts in some areas are offset by increased expenditure in others. Our society prefers to see people fed rather than starving, and cared for rather than neglected. To rely on the goodness of human nature, however, is a very dangerous procedure. When under personal threat of falling standards of living or of cuts in education and medical provision, or loss of work, concern for our neighbours all too easily gives way to taking care of ourselves, and out of sight can be out of mind for 'comfortable Britain'. Human sympathies and imagination are imperfect at best. Public interest is aroused by exciting and prestigious advances in medical science, or the emotive issues in social welfare, and tends to ignore chronic and more intractable problems.

It should come as no surprise to Christians that there are no utopian answers, nor should the church be over-influenced by prevailing attitudes of optimism or pessimism, or current fashions in the sphere of welfare. The biblical commands of concern for righteousness, mutual care and compassion and the ordered society that should flow from these stand for all time, and are a responsibility placed on state, community and individual. The church has a duty to support the social institutions needed to create as just a society as possible, and to challenge policies which threaten this. It also has its own distinctive contribution to make.

The church's contribution

The church's major contribution towards the development of a caring society, it seems to me, lies in the following areas: (1) providing a view of man and society based on biblical teaching (2) the use of the individual gifts of members, enhanced by their identification, development and refinement by the whole fellowship (3) the corporate influence it can have on local, national and international needs (4) its example as a society of redeemed people, without barriers of race, sex or class. This is not to ignore its central functions of worship and witness, without which the others will not, nor cannot be, effective — indeed, they are part and parcel of the same thing.

A biblical view of man in society and its implications

The Bible sees man as a unity of which body, emotions and spirit are a part. He is a created being, dependent on God, and made for a responsible relationship with God, and with his fellow men. Man's dependence on God is not a temporary thing, for this life only, but will continue through eternity. The Bible indicates that human groupings will also continue.

Through the fall, the relationship with God has been lost, man's capacity to live harmoniously with his fellows and the rest of creation has been flawed and social institutions now carry the seeds of corruption. But God still holds man accountable for his stewardship of the natural creation, for personal relationships and for seeking righteousness and justice in the world. Through the redemption and the re-establishment of a relationship with him, he gives the power to fulfil that trust, only partially now, but fully in the future.

The Bible never divorces doctrine from behaviour: Paul, for example, moves in and out of proclamation of the gospel, teaching about the second coming, commenting on conduct in relation to the state, race,

sex, money, and the single life, dealing with family and work roles and obligations, the state and appropriate attitudes and behaviour at different stages in life. Our choice of topics for exposition is usually more selective! The rich and complex account of human life in the Bible corresponds to experience, but it also challenges common, fallen ways of thinking and behaving. The body is not to be despised or abused, neither is it a cause for embarrassment, but is to be cherished and disciplined. Emotions are to be used positively, not ignored or unbridled. The Bible shows social institutions both acting well and facilitating growth, and also malfunctioning and causing damage.

Since man is created, it should come as no surprise that he shares many things in common with the rest of creation, including some mental processes as well as physical attributes. To be human is to be finite, and man's limitations and dependency are part of the creation with which God was well pleased and which in Christ, he entered. Fallenness and finiteness sometimes get confused.

Given this perspective, it is reasonable to regard research in the physical and social sciences as legitimate, remembering that they are about processes rather than purposes. The very complexity and, at times, the almost contradictory nature of their findings only makes sense when man is seen in relation to his creator and the doctrine of the fall is recalled. Much of the research and observation in the social sciences has been in the area of relationships, and acknowledging that these are damaged because of the broken relationship with God can liberate Christians to see where breakdown is most likely to occur, and with the Spirit's help to try to prevent or repair it. It was inadequate theology that led to the tendency to idealize some relationships — as between marriage partnerships and family members — and to neglect others, or regard them with suspicion. Sadly this meant that the church was ill-prepared when it could no longer deny that Christian marriages break down, that Christian parents fail to control or care for their children, that their children rebel, and that infidelity and promiscuity are not unknown among church members. The high breakdown rate among the church's leaders and the prevalence of mental illness among its members (when these were publicized) caused shame and shock. Slowly and painfully, it has been recognized that attention must also be given to emotions, intellect, bodily functioning and environment, as well as man's spiritual nature; a spiritual depression may result from ills of body and mind and the various reactions to them, and to past and present hurts, as well as from specific sins.

Relationships in early years¹

It has been established beyond doubt that the quality of relationships in

early life is crucial for later development, and deprivation of meaningful relationships can lead to profound emotional damage. Indeed the Bible itself attaches great importance to arrangements for child birth and child rearing. A basic attitude to the world of trust or mistrust may well be generated by the degree of security experienced by the baby with a mother or her substitute(s). To place total responsibility for a young child's welfare on the mother, however, is to denigrate the role of the father, and of others. Only as she herself feels supported and cared for will the mother be able to communicate feelings of well-being to her baby and, very early on, the father's contribution in relating directly to the child will be important and become so to an increasingly large degree. The Bible stresses the contribution and responsibility of both parents, and this has implications for the wider church community in the support it gives them and the things it expects from them.

The church, too, should be a place where supplementary relationships can be provided, especially for one parent families or parents lacking help from their own families: older and single people share this responsibility, and while this is frequently acknowledged in dedication services, it is often forgotten afterwards. Families, as we know, are under great pressure, and special help is needed for Christian parents to find the right way for their's to function — we must realize that neither traditional roles, or their modern alternatives are necessarily the best ones for Christian parents to unthinkingly adopt.

Brothers and sisters and others in the peer groups are very significant figures for children. Early on, and usually within the family, they learn that feelings of love and hate are felt towards the same persons, and this is painful. They have to learn how to handle jealousy, anger, possessiveness, rejection, feelings of shame and hurt, how to own up to misdeeds, accept punishment, acquire a sense of what is fair and cope with the fact that life itself is often very unfair indeed. These things live on in adult memories, and shape later behaviour. How far do we take account of these things in our Sunday schools, and what kind of a model do we offer in our church life?

Adolescence

It is well known that adolescence is an important time for establishing both the sense of being a person and sexual identity. It is also a notoriously difficult time for parents, especially since part of the process involves separating out from them. Other adults can be particularly helpful at this time and a prayerful — but not inquisitive or censorious — community, a great support. Much help can be given to young people in discussing sex, homosexuality, preparation for marriage or a single life; while some may choose to discuss these things with their parents,

others may find it easier with someone who is not so close to them. The myth still persists in some quarters that Christians will have direct and unmistakable guidance about their marriage partner which will automatically ensure happiness, and that singleness is an embarrassing misfortune, but thankfully it is fading. There are other, equally misleading, myths about the superior spiritual status of the single life, which can reinforce a tendency to selfishness and an unwillingness to face commitment.

In a time of high unemployment, the need to establish a sense of being a worthwhile person, which is not dependent on the role identity given by paid work and the potential capacity for high remuneration, is even more apparent than at other times. This, too, is an area in which the church has a positive duty to teach, to care, and to counsel.

Loss of relationships

Since relationships are so important, so too are their loss, especially in the first few years of life. The church is in a unique position to offer comfort and practical help to those who have lost people close to them by divorce, illness, or whatever reason, and to be mindful of the scars and particular difficulties of those who have been bereaved in childhood, or have had to deal with the stresses of the divorce, and perhaps remarriage, of their parents involving a complex pattern of relationships.

Often practical help is needed, as well as an opportunity to talk about the one who has gone, to sort out ambivalent feelings of guilt and anger and hurt which are harder to cope with than assured mutual affection — facilitating the process of grieving which is so necessary, but seems so hard to tolerate. Help to those suffering bereavement, whether by death or separation, may involve advice on selling and buying property, negotiating grants and insurance benefits, and perhaps explaining to children what is going on, and including them in it. It needs to be remembered that close relationships outside marriage cause great hurt when they are terminated, and the casualties need no less understanding and support. The reaction of the world is to throw broken relationships away; a Christian response is to acknowledge our sin, seek forgiveness, commit to God the things that cannot be undone, and seek his help to build again. Here is a golden opportunity for offering a ministry which meets these needs, not only to church members but to others as well.

It is only comparatively recently that psychologists have begun to pay attention to the possibility of repairing early broken or damaged relationships in later life. Church members have always had the opportunity of offering much to each other, counting on the healing power of the love of God. It is not always easy to share one's vulnerability, even in

our fellowships, as trust takes time to build, but in the church, if anywhere, such sharing should be safe. The church can and should provide an opportunity to try out new roles and develop different characteristics rather than merely taking over the stereotypes and labels based on secular thinking or assessments based on self perception or that of school, colleagues or family. The New Testament example is of a group never doubting the possibility of forgiveness, growth, change, and restoration, which on that basis is exhorting, comforting, encouraging, confronting, and always loving.

Middle life

The middle years bring their own joys and problems in relationships, needing endurance, patience, self control, wisdom in assessing oneself and others, and the grace of continuance in love. There may be temptations to discontent if expectations have not been fulfilled, and to complacency, ambition or neglect if they have; there are liable to be temptations, too, in the exercise of power over others or to bitterness at powerlessness. The lure of conformity to the world's standards is as strong as ever, and yet perception of this can be dulled. As children grow to adulthood and make their own choices, parents evaluate their performance in their parental role, reassess their attitudes to their own parents and take stock anew of the marriage partnership. Single people assess their compensations or lack of them and the way in which friendships and family relationships have been satisfying or lacking. Sometimes responsibilities for aging parents come when other responsibilities are at their height, early rivalries reappear and sudden illness, death or redundancy precipitate unexpected crises and put relationships under strain. For the Christian, whatever the experience of pleasure or of pain, it can, through the love of God, be turned to good, but the mutual love and support each gives to the other will often be crucial in determining the outcome. Achievement and success need to be differently defined in the church than they are in society at large — at no stage in life is it easy to ask for help — least of all perhaps in its prime.

Old age

Elderly people are not highly regarded in the western world, and supporting them as their proportion of the population increases is likely to be thought of as a growing problem. The tendency for younger people to discount the life experiences and the variety and richness of individual differences in older people clashes head-on with the needs of the elderly to retain these differences and to continue to be allowed to grow, to change, and to contribute. Relationships between the old and the very young can be most precious, particularly where they can give each other

mutual support. The time and attention older people can devote to listening is specially valuable to those with whom other people are often impatient: older people deserve honour — not only for what they have done, but for what they are and what they continue to learn and to face towards the end of life. The temptation to hold on to acknowledged leadership and power in the church when it has been given up elsewhere may be strong, but equally the temptation to lay responsibilities down may prevail. The whole fellowship needs to be involved in determining the right and most useful contribution of older people, recognizing their released potential, as well as their limitations, and reassessments are needed as years increase.

Preparation for death — its anticipation, and discussions about it — should always be a part of church life: no Christian should be isolated from his fellows because of their fear, nor should he be denied the opportunity of sharing with, and receiving strength and comfort from, his fellow believers in so far as he wishes to and can be helped so to do.

The individual gifts of its members

A great deal of discussion has gone on in recent years about the identification of gifts and the need to include all the gifts in the tally, not just the verbal ones of preaching, teaching and prophecy. Even so, it is not an easy task. Many people find it hard to take themselves seriously and to spend time thinking and praying with others about their aspirations and activities, strengths and weaknesses, and coming to a sober assessment of what they can offer. It is often only as the process is engaged in that talents and potential come to light.

A caring church is one which takes its members seriously because God takes them seriously.

The skills and knowledge used in secular employment and ordinary life experience are part of this assessment. So, too, are those talents which the needs of early specialization may have left undeveloped. Some people can cope with buildings, find their way round the legal or social security systems, mend pipes, shop economically, cook, clean, handle money, type, administer, plan kitchens, match colours and chair meetings. Some of these gifts will be used in other contexts and some will not, and their identification and exercise will enrich both the church and the individual. Inefficient central heating, poorly played instruments, faulty seating, difficult access, ugly décor, poor acoustics, badly kept accounts and tedious sermons mean considerable cost in human terms. Gifts not only need exercise and practice, but sometimes their development demands education and this may be a responsibility of the whole fellowship. It is particularly important to identify, develop

and use the gifts of those thought to be weaker members so that their contribution is genuinely useful and appreciated rather than meeting with disapproval or patronage. Their sensitivities may be disconcertingly accurate in assessing the real values and attitudes of the fellowship.

Responsibility for caring is not the prerogative of any one individual — some people are naturally more at home with children, adolescents, adults, elderly people or handicapped people, but the sympathies and understanding of everyone can be enlarged, if they are willing. At different times and in different circumstances, members will share with different people in the fellowship, and all should be ready for this privilege. Acknowledgement by each one of his own liability to temptation and propensity for sin, a real respect and valuing of others, a willingness to share in the painful experiences of another while not flinching at giving pain if it is essential to healing, all these attributes and qualities can form part of growing into the likeness of Christ. Wise counsel is given by those who fear the Lord, and obey his word.

There are many situations in which a common experience and mutual support are more helpful than particular expertise, but there are also situations in which know-how or practical advice and help are called for as well. Many problems have no easy solutions and many situations have to be endured. To know that someone continues to care, share and pray is a wonderful easing of such burdens, especially if it is tried and tested over time.

The gifts of counselling

Some people in the church may feel called to exercise a special ministry of counselling, and the fellowship may recognize that they have a particular gift in this respect. Knowledge and technique are no substitute for godly discernment, but there are things which can be taught and learned which may help Christians to understand themselves and others better. It is very important that the activity of counselling is exercised within the whole body of the church and is subject to its leaders. It is easy to become excited about possibilities of miraculous healing or psychological techniques and to use them in an attempt to bypass the consequences and pain of human experience and to take short cuts. It is also easy to become unduly punitive or pessimistic about the possibility of change, to forget the work of the Spirit in the heart of the believer, and to adopt unconsciously a deterministic philosophy. A caring church will recognize these things and continue to give support and counsel to those whom it designates as counsellors. The fact that those in leadership positions and those who exercise pastoral gifts can themselves be vulnerable, especially if they are isolated, and not 'allowed' common

human frailties, should be well recognized, and special attention given to their needs.

There are both advantages and problems in designating particular people as counsellors. The reawakened concern of the church for its pastoral care can only be welcomed, but there are some causes for concern in current trends in Christian counselling and their possible effects. One of the dangers may be that the distancing which takes place between counsellor and client can divide the church into helpers and helped. Another is that, in the exercise of this gift as of others, rivalries can occur. Issues of confidentiality also arise. However, if counselling gifts are subject to the same recognition and discipline as others, the dangers can be overcome.

Many courses of instruction and educational opportunities are available to help to develop the gift of counselling; all of them need evaluating. Sometimes the perspectives offered illumine problems and often challenge accepted Christian attitudes and biblical interpretation. This may lead to a need to modify and scrutinize these perspectives, or it may lead to a more accurate and closer examination of scripture. This is true not only of the insights and theories put forward by secular psychologies, but also of those which claim to be specifically Christian and biblically based.

Church members in the caring professions

In the church, either locally or within a wider area, there will be some who have undergone professional training and are engaged in one or other of the caring professions. Greater use could probably be made of their skills, especially in an educational role, while recognizing that they have no monopoly of wisdom and at times may need support and comfort when feeling overwhelmed by insoluble problems and the impact of suffering. Especially while they are undergoing training and in the early years of practice, such people need an opportunity to consider the theoretical basis and value-assumptions on which they are operating, in the light of scripture. In the past, there were few evangelical theologians willing to give this kind of help, and, indeed, it requires not only scholarship but a readiness to acknowledge the reality of everyday life experience. Far more help is now being given, and church leaders need to know where to go or to send young professionals grappling with these issues.

A Christian counselling service

There are real advantages in having a Christian counselling service available, staffed by people who have been systematically equipped for the job and carefully selected. Those who come for help to such a service

should be able to assume that Christian values will be shared, and counsel given in a Christian context. Such a service can also offer them confidentiality in a way which is not always easy to guarantee in a church context. In some circumstances it may take great courage and be a very positive step to seek help, which the church should encourage; it should not however use it as a way of off-loading its responsibilities, especially for intractable problems and less attractive church members. It can be a considerable relief to church leaders to share problems and have some direction on how to help; it can also be rewarding for counsellors to work with someone whom they know has a praying and caring community to support them. Counselling is a hard activity, and evaluation of problems, processes and solutions and the integration of psychological and biblical insights is not easy. The mutual support and help Christian counsellors can give each other is therefore particularly valuable. A Christian counselling service is not a total substitute for the statutory services, whether in health or welfare, which may be better suited to those who need specialist help. Some emotional disorders and mental illnesses as well as intractable behaviour problems and welfare provision may require the use of one of these other services. Church members can help a great deal by not stigmatizing, or ignoring from embarrassment, members who are in need of referral and treatment. Anyone may need such a service at any time, and ill-informed gossip, curiosity and isolation can be very hurtful. Unreal expectations can be unhelpful too, but there are times when the reinforcement of reasonable demands on the services by an understanding friend can work wonders, and the support of a concerned church will usually be warmly welcomed.

The church's corporate contribution

In addition to the individual contribution of its members, the church has a corporate contribution to make to the wider community, and can have a powerful impact on local, national and international affairs. Some aspects of this are considered elsewhere in this journal. The particular way in which a *local* church will witness and contribute will depend on a number of things, including the needs and characteristics of the community, and its own size. Most churches have some money and some buildings, as well as the homes and material possessions of their members. Some may have land in places where play space is lacking, and housing at a premium. Where a community has no natural meeting point, the church may be an obvious focus. Retirement communities, inner cities, isolated suburbs, areas of high unemployment will throw up their own needs, while social trends towards fostering of children

and older people and to intermediate treatment or community service for offenders may present other opportunities of service.

There are many excellent reports available from select committees and other sources, whose recommendations require imagination, the right approach, and respect for people as individuals rather than vast amounts of money, and Christians should be able to adopt some of their proposals.

Few would now argue that the church can provide a total alternative system to the health, welfare and educational provisions made by the state, but in some cases that system can be supplemented, or gaps in provision filled at a regional or national level. The provision of hostels for terminally ill people, residential, permanent and temporary care facilities for mentally and physically handicapped children and adults, and housing for the homeless have all been traditional responses of Christian people through the ages to a needy society. Christian institutions, no less than others, have an inbuilt tendency to obsolescence, and staff will need to be aware of the best in contemporary thinking while mediating this through Christian experience, values and beliefs. Local churches have a particular responsibility to support the staff and become involved in such institutions where they are placed in their neighbourhood, as isolation is a very real danger.

If the church is to be salt and light, it will have to take seriously the actions and attitudes of successive governments as they affect the opportunities for people to live a godly and quiet life. Many things are known about the environment which promotes peace and good order and the kinds of social conditions which militate against them. At the present, there seems to be a great deal of disillusionment at the possibility of providing ideal conditions. This is a challenge to the churches to be positive in their approach, to be involved in re-creating networks and inspiring hope. There will be times when international and national problems demand a public stance as well as the private charity and devotion of individuals. The Brethren movement has been at times less well served than others in discussing, praying and seeking guidance on such issues.

The church as a society of redeemed people

If the church is operating as the caring society it should be, it will itself be the greatest testimony to Christ's continued presence in the world. A group of ordinary people, for the most part made up of the least valued members of society, who love and care for each other irrespective of class, race, sex, culture, educational ability, achievement and personal attraction and which holds together through good and bad times, is

something every nation longs to know how to create, especially if such a group is concerned for others, open to all, and welcomes them to join it.

Since the church is a group, it will resemble aspects of other groups — family, work groups, local communities and organizations — and will have similar dynamics. This is not to reduce it, but to recognize that God made man, not to live alone, or even in pairs and families, but to belong to a wider community.

Groups go through various stages, and at different times will be pre-occupied with different things; some of these concerns will be to do with maintaining the relationship between members, and others with accomplishing tasks. As priorities vary from time to time, first one and then another of the members will find their gifts needed, or be given the capacity for meeting a particular need for which they had not previously been equipped. Among the things that will be needed for maintaining the group are the gift of welcoming new members and helping the church to alter in order to meet their needs and make way for their contribution, the gift of easing tensions in or motivating a stable group, the gift of helping to establish a different balance when members leave, numbers increase or decrease, and circumstances or environments change. Among the gifts that will be needed for accomplishing tasks are identifying things which need to be done, over what time span, and the best method of achieving them. It may be a task best carried out by one person, supported by the rest, or it may call for a small group operating over a limited period, or for the entire resources of the church in one way or another.

Leadership in such a group needs all the qualities stressed in the New Testament: humility, service, spiritual maturity and godly example. In particular it will involve discerning the mind of the Spirit for the church at any one time, and calling out and praying for the necessary gifts from members to answer that call. That all members matter to each other and need each other's contribution is a fact of group dynamics, not a pious sentiment or a condescending gesture to the less obviously gifted. Knowing the tendency of groups to establish and conform to their own norms, the leader will need special vigilance to make sure these are in line with those laid down for members of the kingdom, and exhort, discipline and call to repentance where necessary. Leaders will endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There are many things to help the church achieve this unity — not the short cuts to cohesion of muddling together against an outside threat, but the right identification of a common foe, joint goals, identical standards of behaviour and, above all, one Lord, one faith, shared symbols and corporate acts, and the same energizing Spirit. Given such powerful pulls towards unity, differences can be recognized, accepted, and even

embraced, so that they enrich rather than threaten, and unity is achieved, not by making people conform to each other's preferences and patterns, but by transcending all barriers as all the members are being transformed into Christ's image.

God's crowning act is the creation of such a caring society in spite of divisions, prejudices and limitations. What the world sees is work in progress, and despite the church's failures, the fact of its existence at all is a testimony to the reality of the one Lord and father who called it into being, sustains and will one day perfect it.

NOTES

1. A fuller account of 'life stage crises' is to be found in part one of Ruth Fowke's recently published book *Growing through Crises*, (Marshalls, 1985).