



Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization

The Whole Church taking the Whole Gospel to the Whole World

**NON TRADITIONAL FAMILIES**  
**Reaching families with the Good News**

**Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 36**

Produced by the Issue Group on this topic at the  
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Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization

In Pattaya, Thailand, September 29 to October 5, 2004

**“A New Vision, a New Heart, a Renewed Call”**

In encouraging the publication and study of the Occasional Papers, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization does not necessarily endorse every viewpoint expressed in these papers.

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## The context for the production of the Lausanne Occasional Papers

The Lausanne Movement is an international movement committed to energising  
“**the whole Church to take the whole gospel to the whole world.**”

With roots going back to the historical conferences in Edinburgh (1910) and Berlin (1966), the Lausanne Movement was born out of the First International Congress on World Evangelization called by evangelist Billy Graham held in Lausanne, Switzerland, in July 1974. The landmark outcome of this Congress was the **Lausanne Covenant** supported by the 2,430 participants from 150 nations. The covenant proclaims the substance of the Christian faith as historically declared in the creeds and adds a clear missional dimension to our faith. Many activities have emerged from the Lausanne Congress and from the second congress held in Manila in 1989. The Covenant (in a number of languages), and details about the many regional events and specialised conferences which have been undertaken in the name of Lausanne, may be examined online at [www.lausanne.org](http://www.lausanne.org).

The Lausanne International Committee believed it was led by the Holy Spirit to hold another conference which would bring together Christian leaders from around the world. This time the Committee planned to have younger emerging leaders involved and sought funds to enable it to bring a significant contingent from those parts of the world where the church is rapidly growing today. It decided to call the conference a **Forum**. As a Forum its structure would allow people to come and participate if they had something to contribute to one of 31 issues (around which were formed Issue Groups). These issues were chosen through a global research programme seeking to identify the most significant issues in the world today which are of concern in our task to take the *good news* to the world.

This Lausanne Occasional Paper (LOP) is the report that has emerged from one of these Issue Groups. LOPs have been produced for each of the Issue Groups and information on these and other publications may be obtained online at [www.lausanne.org](http://www.lausanne.org).

The theme of the Forum for World Evangelization held in 2004 was “**A new vision, a new heart, a renewed call.**” This Forum was held in Pattaya, Thailand from September 29 to October 5, 2004. 1,530 participants came from 130 countries to work in one of the 31 Issue Groups.

The Affirmations at the conclusion of the Forum stated:

“There has been a spirit of working together in serious dialogue and prayerful reflection. Representatives from a wide spectrum of cultures and virtually all parts of the world have come together to learn from one another and to seek new direction from the Holy Spirit for world evangelization. They committed themselves to joint action under divine guidance.

The dramatic change in the political and economic landscape in recent years has raised new challenges in evangelization for the church. The polarization between east and west makes it imperative that the church seek God’s direction for the appropriate responses to the present challenges.

In the 31 Issue Groups these new realities were taken into consideration, including the HIV pandemic, terrorism, globalization, the global role of media, poverty, persecution of Christians, fragmented families, political and religious nationalism, post-modern mind set, oppression of children, urbanization, neglect of the disabled and others.

Great progress was made in these groups as they grappled for solutions to the key challenges of world evangelization. As these groups focused on making specific recommendations, larger strategic themes came to the forefront.

There was affirmation that major efforts of the church must be directed toward those who have no access to the gospel. The commitment to help establish self sustaining churches within 6,000 remaining unreached people groups remains a central priority.

Secondly, the words of our Lord call us to love our neighbour as ourselves. In this we have failed greatly. We renew our commitment to reach out in love and compassion to those who are marginalised because of disabilities or who have different lifestyles and spiritual perspectives. We commit to reach out to children and young people who constitute a majority of the world's population, many of whom are being abused, forced into slavery, armies and child labour.

A third stream of a strategic nature acknowledges that the growth of the church is now accelerating outside of the western world. Through the participants from Africa, Asia and Latin America, we recognise the dynamic nature and rapid growth of the church in the *South*. Church leaders from the *South* are increasingly providing exemplary leadership in world evangelization.

Fourthly, we acknowledge the reality that much of the world is made up of oral learners who understand best when information comes to them by means of stories. A large proportion of the world's populations are either unable to or unwilling to absorb information through written communications. Therefore, a need exists to share the "Good News" and to disciple new Christians in story form and parables.

Fifthly, we call on the church to use media to effectively engage the culture in ways that draw non-believers toward spiritual truth and to proclaim Jesus Christ in culturally relevant ways.

Finally, we affirm the priesthood of all believers and call on the church to equip, encourage and empower women, men and youth to fulfil their calling as witnesses and co-labourers in the world wide task of evangelization.

Transformation was a theme which emerged from the working groups. We acknowledge our own need to be continually transformed, to continue to open ourselves to the leading of the Holy Spirit, to the challenges of God's word and to grow in Christ together with fellow Christians in ways that result in social and economic transformation. We acknowledge that the scope of the gospel and building the Kingdom of God involves, body, mind, soul and spirit. Therefore we call for increasing integration of service to society and proclamation of the gospel.

We pray for those around the world who are being persecuted for their faith and for those who live in constant fear of their lives. We uphold our brothers and sisters who are suffering. We recognize that the reality of the persecuted church needs to be increasingly on the agenda of the whole Body of Christ. At the same time, we also acknowledge the importance of loving and doing good to our enemies while we fight for the right of freedom of conscience everywhere.

We are deeply moved by the onslaught of the HIV/AIDS pandemic – the greatest human emergency in history. The Lausanne movement calls all churches everywhere to prayer and holistic response to this plague.

"9/11," the war in Iraq, the war on terror and its reprisals compel us to state that we must not allow the gospel or the Christian faith to be captive to any one geo-political entity. We affirm that the Christian faith is above all political entities.

We are concerned and mourn the death and destruction caused by all conflicts, terrorism and war. We call for Christians to pray for peace, to be proactively involved in reconciliation and avoid all attempts to turn any conflict into a religious war. Christian mission in this context lies in becoming peacemakers.

We pray for peace and reconciliation and God's guidance in how to bring about peace through our work of evangelization. We pray for God to work in the affairs of nations to open doors of opportunity for the gospel. We call on the church to mobilize every believer to focus specific consistent prayer for the evangelization of their communities and the world.

In this Forum we have experienced the partnership of men and women working together. We call on the church around the world to work towards full partnership of men and women in the work of world evangelism by maximising the gifts of all.

We also recognize the need for greater intentionality in developing future leaders. We call on the church to find creative ways to release emerging leaders to serve effectively.”

Numerous practical recommendations for local churches to consider were offered. These will be available on the Lausanne website and in the Lausanne Occasional Papers. It is our prayer that these many case studies and action plans will be used of God to mobilise the church to share a clear and relevant message using a variety of methods to reach the most neglected or resistant groups so that everyone will have the opportunity to hear the gospel message and be able to respond to this good news in faith.

We express our gratitude to the Thai Church which has hosted us and to their welcoming presentation to the Forum. We are profoundly grateful to God for the privilege of being able to gather here from the four corners of the earth. We have developed new partnerships, made new friends and encouraged one another in our various ministries. Notwithstanding the resistance to the gospel in many places and the richness of an inherited religious and cultural tradition we here at the Forum have accepted afresh the renewed call to be obedient to the mandate of Christ. We commit ourselves to making His saving love known so that the whole world may have opportunity to accept God’s gift of salvation through Christ.”

These affirmations indicate the response of the participants to the Forum outcomes and their longing that the whole church may be motivated by the outcomes of the Forum to strengthen its determination to be obedient to God’s calling.

May the case studies and the practical suggestions in this and the other LOPs be of great help to you and your church as you seek to find new ways and a renewed call to proclaim the saving love of Jesus Christ

*David Claydon*

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## 1. AN INTRODUCTION

**'Non traditional families'**. What were your thoughts when you read the title?

Perhaps they were of:

- a lone parent with children
- a step family
- a mixed race or inter-faith family
- a man with several wives and their children
- a cohabiting couple with children and a dog
- a same sex couple with adopted children
- a widow creating a new form of family with orphaned children
- an elderly couple caring for grandchildren
- a nuclear family isolated from community
- a single person actively involved with extended family and god-children

Families come in many shapes and styles. They are universal but they differ from culture to culture. Within one community families that are the same shape may function differently. For example one may be patriarchal or matriarchal in style while another may practice mutually shared leadership. Parenting styles may differ, some being authoritarian ('I am your parent and I will tell you what to do'), some authoritative ('Let's discuss this and see what is best') whilst others are easy-going and inconsistent. This is true of families with Christians in them and those without.

Those of us who met to explore the task of reaching families with the Good News found that we could speak from first-hand experience of being family people – sons, daughters, siblings, spouses, aunts, uncles, cousins, parents, grandparents. Our birth families were often different in shape and style from the families in which we live now. There are so often behaviour patterns which have been carried from generation to generation.

We met as an Issue Group at the Forum and realised that we all had a passion for ministry with families and that we were all committed to the purpose of the Issue Group to consider ways in which local churches might reach out to those who are living in a family pattern which may not be the norm for a Christian family. We also recognised that in different ways the families we represented were somewhat non-traditional, at least as others perceived them. We discovered that what is perceived as traditional in one culture is non-traditional and even unacceptable in another. Family forms that are lawful in some countries, e.g. same sex families and polygamous families are unlawful in others. These discoveries raised questions.

What is meant by the term 'traditional family'?

Does family shape or form really matter?

How might Scripture, Christian tradition and culture inform plans for reaching families?

What examples of 'best practice' could we offer the Christian community?

What resources could we suggest to those who want to explore this issue further?

The group set out on a journey of discovery. The group makes no claims to have found 'right answers', but it has some insights and its journey to share. Group members do not claim that we all agree with every word that is in this document. However, we do trust each other and recognise that we are in dialogue, travelling in the same direction. We met and worked as brothers and sisters in Christ, members of one family by the grace of God.

The group did not reach its destination. Neither did it expect to do so. There is still much work to be done. Rather than giving definitive answers the group offers its 'journey so far' or its 'work in progress' to you and invites you to travel with it. That is why there are questions for consideration and tasks to undertake as you read. It is the

hope of the group that this journey will help you and your Christian community as you seek to understand families and how best to reach them.

Before you begin to study this paper, we would want you to note that our emphasis was primarily about families. While there are many forms of family life with marriage at the centre there are others that exist without marriage. For example: sibling families, lone parent and child-headed families.

***Task***

- Consider your own experience of family life, when you were a child and now?
- What are the similarities and differences between your birth family and your family now?
- Think about family shape or form and how the family functions - roles, material goods, values and beliefs, parenting style, times together and times apart.

## 2. TRENDS: FAMILY FORMS AND FUNCTIONING

Families are affected by environmental factors that affect their ability to do their job of nourishing individuals. Individuals need families that provide an environment in which they can grow and flourish, where mental, physical, emotional and spiritual needs are met. As social people family members require a place of belonging in a family or family-like household. This applies to adults and children alike. The health of families is influenced by the environment in which they are 'planted'. The environment for families is affected by the prevailing culture in which families are placed and by the outworking of decisions made by local, government and international bodies. Further factors sweep across the world affecting families in their wake, natural disasters, terrorism, HIV/Aids. In short, the environment in which families live is affected by local, national, international human actions and by natural environmental factors. These factors result in trends that affect families, both their shape and their internal workings.

Early in its life the Issue Group identified some trends. Others may be identified or expanded upon as you read the work of different Issue Groups, such as the Occasional Papers on *Globalisation*, *At Risk People* and *Evangelization of Children*.

### **A trend to new forms of family: an effect of HIV/Aids**

The first trend to emerge was the formation of new forms of family in cultures where HIV/Aids has had a devastating effect. These families have been formed to meet the needs of increasing numbers of orphans. In Kenya, for example:

1. Grandparent led families are caring for orphaned grandchildren. Traditionally, the family has cared for its elderly members, now the position has been reversed and who will do the 'caring' as older people become frail? Many orphaned children are themselves infected with HIV/Aids and do not have a long life expectancy.
2. Older children are caring for their younger brothers and sisters in sibling families. These and other child-led families can be open to exploitation and are sometimes used as brothels, exposing the children to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/Aids as well as drugs and substance abuse.
3. Child-led families exist where older children care for younger children who may not be their kinfolk.
4. Adoptive families have emerged when families have either taken in orphaned children or adults have moved into the family home to care for children.
5. Orphanages have been set up, sometimes as money-making ventures. These are usually led by one or two adults and are found more commonly in Eastern Europe.
6. In many cities there are children living on the streets, joining *street families*, living off what they find on garbage heaps or earn through begging and possibly prostitution.
7. Widow families are developing where widows form family-type units in which young widows care for older widows. They assist each other emotionally and economically. Orphaned children may come to live with them who are not related in any way. Widowers tend to remarry, often women much younger than themselves.

The family forms listed above are evident in many African and Latin American countries. Many of these also occur in Asia and Eastern Europe. They have increased in numbers in response to the effects of HIV/Aids on the community, especially the impact of increased poverty experienced when the 'worker/earning generation' of families is removed through sickness and death. Economic hardship is a driving force in the shaping of families.

Newly shaped families<sup>1</sup> may have formed, but it does not mean that they have 'a roof over their heads'. While HIV/Aids has had a massive effect, how the community adjusts to its impact is affected by cultural beliefs. In Kenya for instance, the widow has to be 'culturally inherited', i.e. have sex with another man, before she can put up a

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Auma, Kenya

house. If she refuses she and her children may end up homeless. (She often loses the house she shared with her husband before his death.) Orphans on the other hand may be discouraged from occupying their dead parents' house because of the spirit of death which they think is looming in the house and may affect the children even leading them to an early death. So we see that cultural beliefs and practices can work to make the situation of family's even worse – in this case an increase in homelessness.

### **Tasks**

Reflect and discuss:

- There are drugs available in 'rich countries' that lengthen the lives of people who are HIV positive. What can the church do at local, national and international levels to make such drugs available where they are desperately needed?
- Use your empathy skills to get inside some of the families described. What is life like in those families? Think of relationships, the home, food, shelter, suffering, laughter, faith and hope or hopelessness. How might Christians in these families be supported?
- How might Christians working alongside such families share the Good News with them through their deeds, actions and words?

### **A trend towards smaller families**

A number of factors have influenced the size of families.

#### **Factor 1: contraception**

In many countries the birth-rate is decreasing. The availability of contraception, especially 'the pill' since the 1950s has given people, primarily women the choice about how many children they might have. They are choosing to have fewer. In the UK the statistics show that were 2.4 children in the 1980s and it is now down to 1.7 children per couple in their child-rearing years.

#### **Factor 2: changing roles of women and men**

When women gained more control over their fertility they were able to play a greater role in society outside the home. Their expectations changed. Issues of gender were discussed and the roles of women and men in families changed. The word 'parenting' entered the vocabulary, to describe the shared activity of both genders in caring for children. Before that there were 'mothers' and 'fathers' with specific roles<sup>2</sup>.

#### **Factor 3: urbanisation**

In agrarian societies more children were needed to work the land and to care for those who had worked it before them. Having more children was 'economically sound' though it was accepted that not all would reach adulthood – accidents, strife and illness saw to that. Parents needed to be left with enough adult children to keep the family system fed and basic needs met.

With the move to urban living that has occurred across the globe children are less necessary to the family economy. Instead they may be perceived as 'an expense' and parents are expected to provide more for them in terms of material goods, leisure experiences/hobbies and education. It appears to be less problematic to provide for two children rather than 7 or 8 as our grandparents did.

#### **Factor 4: individualism and privatisation of family**

In the 1980s individualism was emphasised across the western world. Margaret Thatcher (UK Prime Minister) is famous for her remark: '*There is no such thing as society.*' Individuals were encouraged '*to stand on their own two feet*'. Dependence was perceived as a bad thing. Families were encouraged to 'stand on their own feet too'. They became increasingly private and often disconnected from the wider community at a time when they were becoming smaller.

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<sup>2</sup> S. Kramer: Tavistock Clinic, London

‘However, human beings need to recognise their proper dependence on other people. Family relationships provide the most obvious opportunities for learning about the subtle balance between being individuals and being members of society. Family life also forces people to recognise their need for interaction with others for mutual inspiration and support and to make use of services that can only be provided on a communal basis...The growth of individualism is damaging if it undermines the interdependence of individuals in families and wider communities’<sup>3</sup>

We are now in a situation in western cultures where many families are ‘individuals living in parallel under the same roof but not really ‘meeting’, even at mealtimes. Different generations have less contact with each other and many people live virtual lives through their computers and television sets.

Of course, individualism, which was not a new invention in the 1980s, brought with it some creative changes. Children began to be seen as individuals who mattered and women resisted being treated as possessions to be given or received in marriage. They had a say, even a choice and with a good job and income a woman could choose to remain single, to have children without marriage or a long-term relationship. Some very small families were created.

#### **Factor 5: mobility and work**

Greater mobility means that families can be separated. One partner may be responsible for most child-care while the other is at work for most of the time. Whether commuting daily to the big city or weekly to another continent, or annually between city and home village the second parent is basically not present with the partner or spouse for much of the time. This has its own effects on family relationships both for the partner and the children. Movement across countries and continents can add to relationship stress and two-home families where one person lives alone most of the time. It is also a factor in the establishment of more interfaith, inter-church and cross-cultural families.

#### **Factor 6: social engineering through legislation**

Faced with a spiralling birth-rate that was becoming a problem the Chinese introduced the one-child policy in 1980. There was a dramatic reduction in the size of families (a good thing) but it left few young people to provide for many older people in their families.

In the UK legislation to enable lone parents to find work (a good thing because they wanted to be helped out of poverty with dignity) has led to parents being present with their children for less time and family life seems more hurried and stressful.

All these factors have contributed to the reduction in size of families. Family size can be a difficulty. A small, private, nuclear family cannot do the work of a community. There is too much invested in too few relationships. One relationship (however intimate) cannot and was not designed to meet all the individual needs of the partners. The investment that parents put into raising one or two children can often be too much for them to bear. Family life can become too intense with too little laughter in its shared life.

Nuclear families usually thrive when they are networked with other families. They need to be linked into community. When they are not, they easily implode and this leads to the development of more family trends. These include:

- Increased numbers of extra marital affairs
- More divorces
- Couples choosing to co-habit rather than marry
- Increased numbers of lone parent families
- Increased numbers of one-person households

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<sup>3</sup> Synod Report, Something to Celebrate: valuing families in church and society, Church House Publishing, London (1995) 16.

Remarriage and blending families has generated the new trend towards having larger families!

### **Task**

Reflect on the factors listed above. How have they affected your experience of family life? Some effects may be positive and others not.

### **A trend towards ageing families**

With increased medical knowledge and better nutrition in many countries, life expectancy has increased substantially. Simultaneously, the birth-rate has declined. This means that the age profile of many societies has changed with proportionately more people in the older age brackets and in retired or ageing households than in younger and more economically active families. With fewer young adults than older adults there are issues of caring for and funding the elderly. Older families and retired adults are relatively poor in most societies.

### **Tasks**

Discuss these questions and think about the contribution which your local church could make.

- How much effort does the church put into reaching older people?
- What have they got to offer younger families in terms of knowledge, attitudes, skills and time and faith?

### **A trend towards gender imbalance and singleness**

With better care through pregnancy increasing numbers of babies are healthy when born and grow up to become mature members of society. It used to be that many boy children were lost at birth (more than girls) or through illness, accident or fighting. When this happened many societies ended up with roughly the same number of men and women in adulthood – one each for marriage purposes. Exceptions were after World Wars 1 and 2 when there were more women and men. Now the numbers of men in relation to the numbers of women are increasing. In the UK alone it is thought that there may be 1 million more men than women of marriageable age<sup>4</sup>.

In other parts of the world boy babies are more acceptable than girls. Girls may be given away or even killed. This creates a gender imbalance. If current trends continue for every 100 married couples in China there will be 18.5 single men with no women available for them to marry.<sup>5</sup>

It appears that a number of societies will include massive numbers of single people (approximately one-fifth of all men in China). Some will be widowed, others will have chosen not to marry, some will have had no choice to marry or have a partner and some will be divorced. One wonders if there will be different forms of family developed under these circumstances.

### **Tasks**

Consider and discuss:

- What effect might gender imbalance have on families and the wider community?
- What are the prevailing attitudes towards single people in your society?
- What special qualities do single people bring to your church?
- How does your church affirm, support and disciple single people within it?
- Human beings are designed to be social and to need company. Think of creative ways in which single people might have their human need for company met. How can the churches support them in this?
- Jesus was a single man and fully human. He was complete and unmarried. How did He ensure that His human need for company was met? Think of His

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<sup>4</sup> UK Government, *Social Trends*, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Jasper Becker, *The Chinese*, Free Press, 2000, 237.

family-like group of 12 and the women who were part of His wider network of friends. Think of the inner group of 3 (Peter, James and John) and Jesus' closest friend, John, who stood by Him at the cross and was asked to care for Mary, Jesus' birth mother. With these thoughts in mind what might the church say to single people today?

### 3. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ABOUT FAMILIES

First of all: there are different forms of family and family-like ways of life. The different family forms change through the years depending on the culture and society they are found in. What seems to be 'traditional' or 'non-traditional' depends on the point of view of each person. Being Christians, we need not be afraid of family forms unknown to us. Instead we might show love and mercy to families or households whatever their shape or form.

#### **1. Family and creation**

Our Trinitarian God is relationship-oriented. God is Father, Son and Spirit – three persons who are one. We can see God's personality reflected in creation. Human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:6-27) and relationship-oriented. God is called 'Father' in the relationship between God and people (Deuteronomy 32:6; Isaiah 9:6; Jeremiah 31:9; Matthew 6:9; John 14: 9; Romans 8:15). Yet 'Father' has also a feminine connotation, as we can see some feminine characteristics that refer to God, e.g. Isaiah 49.15; 66:13. 'Father' should therefore not be seen in terms of a specific gender. Perhaps the word 'parent' gives us a more accurate insight into the nature of our motherly-fatherly God.

Human beings also need relationships because they are made in God's image. Man himself is not complete, neither is woman. They each need a team-mate. A man needs a woman as his help and mate (Genesis 2:18). God is our helper and the model for this. But God has also intended all the other relationships to be dependent on each other. Therefore, human beings are dependent on many relationships - parents, brothers and sisters, relatives, friends and the society they live in. The marriage relationship alone is insufficient for our welfare. We need a range of different relationships. However, the marriage relationship is the most intimate human relationship based on covenant and faithfulness. Even so, this relationship is not the one that makes us truly complete. True completeness comes through union with Christ (Colossians 2.10) and is open to children, single and married people alike.

Unity is another part of God's personality – the Father, Son and Spirit are one. Such unity is reflected in creation. We can read about the closest relationship between a man and a woman in the Bible, where this relationship is called 'to be one flesh'. We can see how the family was intended to be a union where God's '*Shalom*' is reigning.

#### **2. Family, marriage, partnership and other forms of family**

The basic unit is the relationship between a man and a woman. We cannot discuss 'family' without the condition of marriage or partnership because a man and a woman as a couple make a new unit separated from their parents (Genesis 2.24). However, we are not saying here that marriage, committed couple-hood is the only family'. The couple, make up their own family – even if they continue to live in the same household as their parents. In the Old Testament this means that 'usually the woman enters into the community of the family of the man (e.g. Genesis 24: 5-8, 58-59), but also other forms seem to be possible' (Genesis 31. 26-43; 2.24)<sup>6</sup>. Throughout Scripture we see that 'family' is a household of 'incarnate members' (linked by blood and covenant) and 'incorporated members' (linked in other ways, e.g. by adoption).

#### **We can see different forms of family in the Bible**

Families of the patriarchs in the Old Testament were often polygamous. A closer look at how these families functioned reveals their fallen state. We find a full range of human relationship difficulties within them, as we do in all forms of family – jealousy, hatred, favouritism, murder, greed, adultery and disloyalty. The Mosaic Law refers to problems that arise, e.g. Deuteronomy 21.15-17.

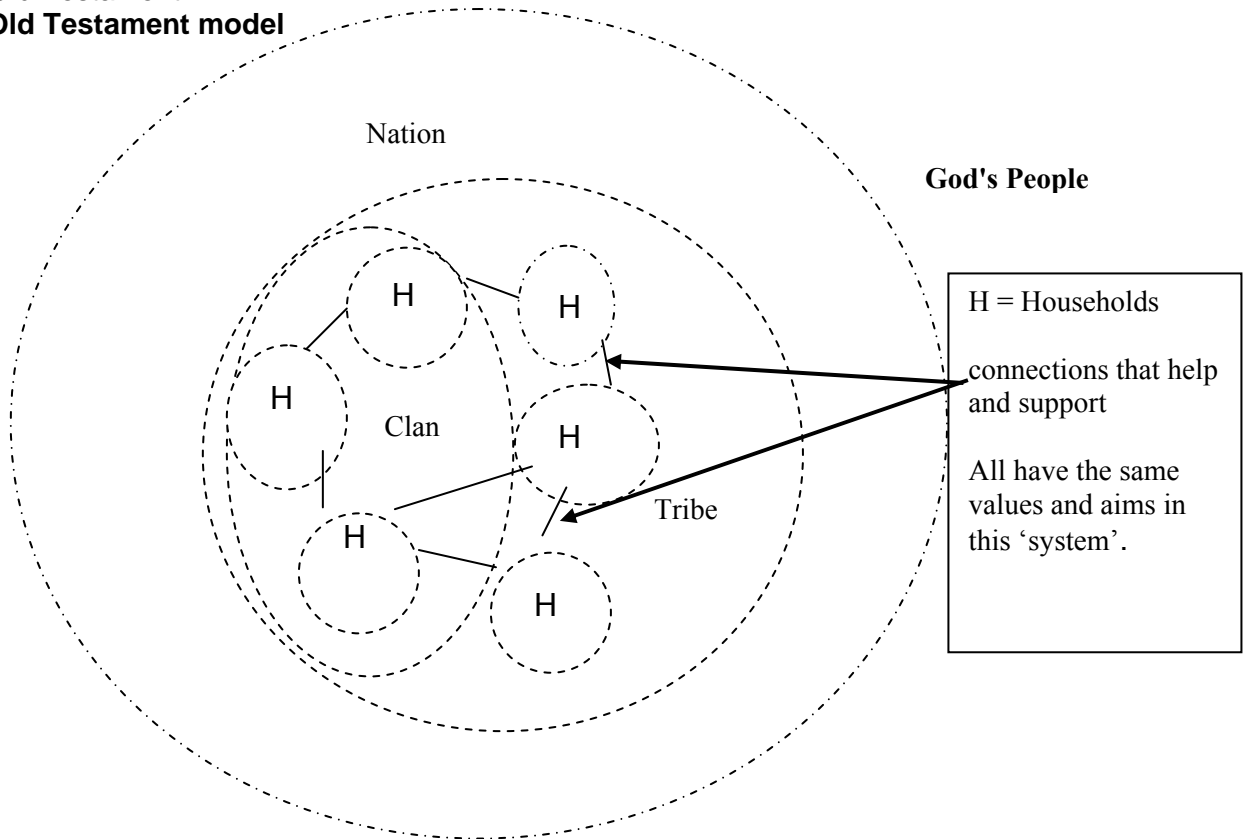
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<sup>6</sup> Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments* (1984), 243.

Fathers were traditionally the leaders of the families, but in the Old and New Testament we find that women also led families, e.g. Rahab, Lydia. The nature of that leadership needs further exploration. What is the style of that leadership? How is the authority and power that comes with the role used – to empower and enable growth, to exploit and abuse? The families were not seen as being independent from the other families of God's people in the Old Testament. A family is always integrated in a bigger community. This integration is a kind of security net that functions even if the family net does not work. Therefore the tribe or clan helps with integration into the culture.

The following scheme shows the social relationship network of God's people in the Old Testament:

**An Old Testament model**



The different units are, according to Joshua 7, the following: nation – tribe – clan – household. A household in times of the Old Testament was a family consisting of several generations and slaves. For example, Achan was the grandson in his family.

Although slaves and servants of the family lived in the same household they did not necessarily become heirs (John 8:35). This shows that they were not part of the family in every respect.

In Israel, foreigners were able to become part of the family if they obeyed certain laws (Exodus 12:48; Numbers 9:14), but usually they were not regarded as suitable as husbands or wives (see Ezra 10:2-11). Ruth was an exception.

Family forms also change. Ruth (Ruth 4:13) was married with an extended family. She was widowed and became a two woman family with her mother-in-law in a foreign land, then they travelled home and she married Bathseba a distant relation through marriage and formed a new family. Provision for the care and welfare of the more vulnerable, was made through marriage with other relatives and the provision of grain for gleaning left by the farmers when they harvested.

**3. God is gracious**

It seems that just as we can see God's hand in the rest of creation so there is a godly pattern that reveals his intention for the organisation of human community. All were to be included in families (small community) supported by and supporting

community at various levels – tribe, clan and nation. Unfortunately, all families and communities, whatever their size are spoiled by sin and so the godly pattern was not always experienced or even evident. However, the magnificent lesson for us is that no matter how terrible the individual or family, God is gracious and continues to reach out in love to people. Despite their sinful actions God was able to use some Old Testament characters mightily, such as David who often had to repent of his terrible deeds.

#### ***Monogamous family became a norm***

In times of the New Testament monogamous families were normal. Jesus often referred to the law of creation in his discussions (one woman – one man: Matthew 19; Mark 10; Luke 16) and Paul (1Corinthians 7; Ephesians 5) refers to the monogamous form when talking about marriage issues. Leaders had to lead a monogamous life (1 Timothy 3).

However, it is important to remember that both in the Old and New Testament a man and his wife still were part of the family of origin besides their new founded family. We can see this in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:12). Children and parents are united life-long. Jesus says in Matthew 15:1-9 expressly that even pious rules or laws will not repeal the commandment that expects both young and adult children to respect their parents. Ancestors and descendants are important to the family. Therefore, each person is part of a family even if s/he does not found a new family him/herself.

#### ***4. Family duties and home-based education***

Together women and men have the duty since creation to cultivate the earth and take care of it while using resources responsibly (Genesis 2:15). This responsibility includes having children (Genesis 1:28) and it extends to families or households and how they function. (The fact that couples do not want to or cannot have children of their own does not change this aspect of the purpose of marriage.)

Just as the birds need nests to raise their young so human beings need a place to belong in which to raise children. The care of children was connected to the command to educate, to enable them to know the faith story and place their trust in God. The responsibility for education was in the home, supported by the community and ultimately the nation. Parents were examples who educated through relationships and dialogue, by having routines and rituals, e.g. wearing phylacteries, celebrating Sabbath meals in their home, by telling stories (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), giving wise advice (Proverbs 1:8), providing boundaries and just discipline, (Deuteronomy 8:5) and giving lifestyle guidance (Proverbs 31.1). Both fathers and mothers were the educators.

By sharing life in families where parents fulfil this role, the children gain insight into the faith and values which their parents hold. Their experiences of human love, justice, protection, guidance, care, forgiveness etc. through family relationships help them to know something about the attributes of God. They are encouraged to place their trust in the One their parents worship, show them and tell them about. They are evangelised through the experiences of daily life shared in the home. Hopefully, as they grow and are nurtured in faith they will come to own their faith in different ways – ways that are appropriate for them at their age and with their understandings

In the New Testament we find Jesus encouraging adults to let the children come to him. He emphasised their significance to him and his kingdom. No stumbling block was to be put in their way. Guidelines for living in the community of church and home are given in Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3.

#### ***4. Family, sin and salvation***

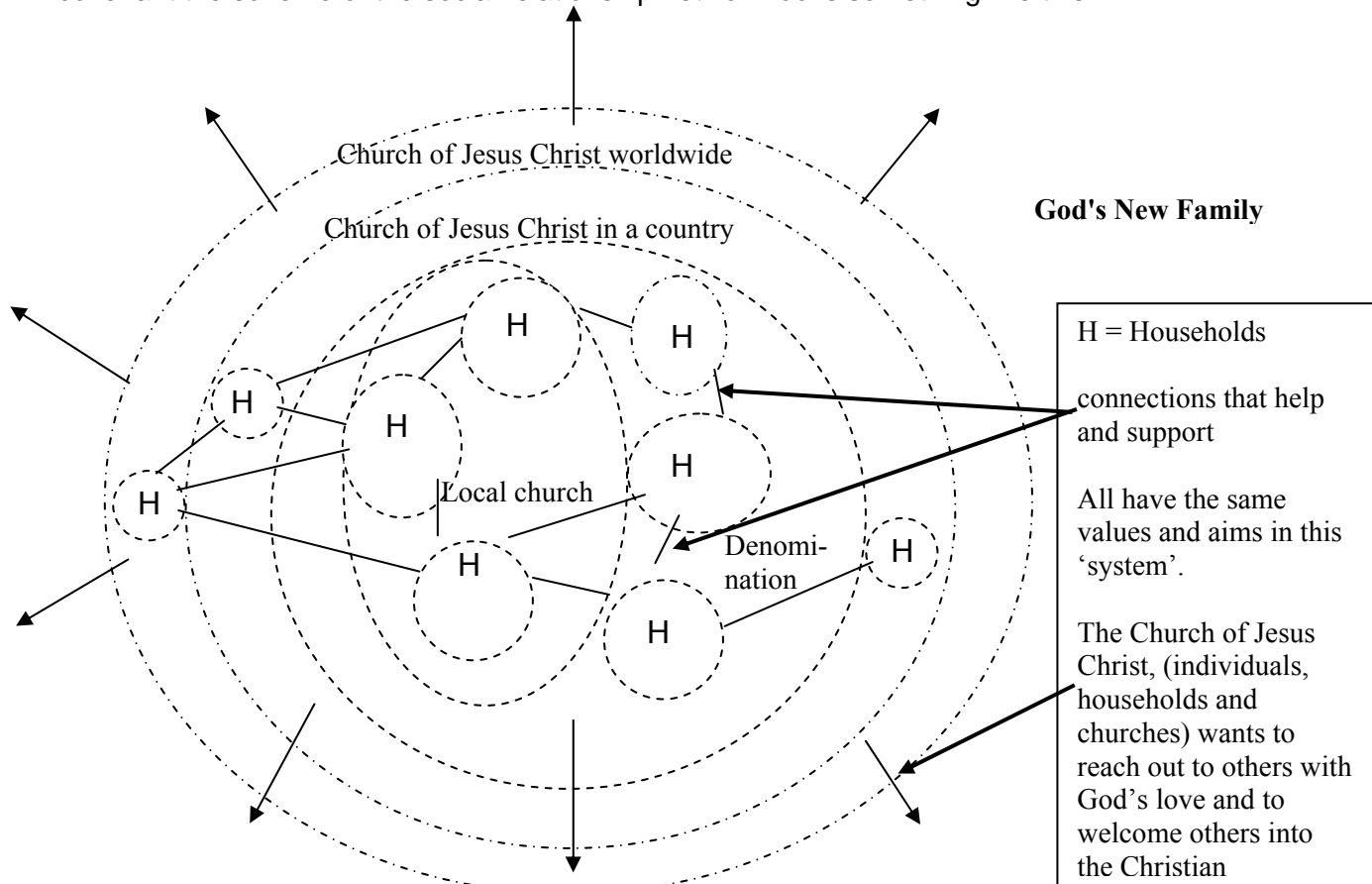
There is no family that works absolutely the way God wants it to. Families are influenced by sin (Romans 3.16). Sometimes this is the sin of the individual or the family itself. Sometimes the family is sinned against.

To believe in Christ means to be part of God's household or to put it another way, to be members of his family (Ephesians 2:19) sharing a loving parent who is God (1 John 3). Through Christ social relationships are being renewed in this context, Jesus

already talked about it while teaching (Mark 3:35; Matthew 10:35, 36). The social net was not connected any longer to the tribe or clan one was born into. Instead the belonging was to Christ and thus God's family (see Acts 4:32-37 and 6:1-5). Even social and racial barriers lose their meaning (Galatians 3:28).

In the Family of God, families and households are not being broken up. They keep their meaning as small communities in which people are nurtured, healed, grow, learn, develop, offer hospitality and are good neighbours. Families continue to be an important part of the social network. They become agents of God's kingdom as they live in the world (1Peter 2:11-12).

Jesus established a New Community and a New Covenant. Under this covenant the scheme of the social relationship network looks something like this:



### Tasks

1. Read and reflect on 1 Peter 2. 9 –12 in relation to the diagram above.

The Holy Nation refers to the world-wide church. It is organised into Christian communities or churches. These bring together people from different kinship families and households. The guidelines for living given to the worldwide family, the Church, are to be applied in local churches and households with Christians in them because these are local expressions of the family of faith<sup>7</sup>.

- Discuss: what would be the characteristics of a church that functions and relates as a community of households?
- How would household members relate and be with one another in a household that is part of the family of faith?

2. The task of the Christian Family (in its big and small expressions) is described in verses 11 and 12. Through their corporate life churches, families and households that know God's mercy and their faith-relatedness are to proclaim and demonstrate the

<sup>7</sup> Alive to God, Scripture Union: London 1986

Good News. If this is so, what are the implications for churches and the families within them today?

3. In your context what would family-to-family evangelism involve or look like?

4. Through faith in Christ we enter a new family and become brothers and sisters related through the blood of Christ rather than through kinship or marriage. We must not idolise human families, but rather see that God's original design was for families to be related through both kinship and faith – worshipping one God. As we reach out to families the hope is that they will come to know faith-relatedness so that grandparents, parents and children relate to God as children (young and adult children) and to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

If adults perceived their parenting relationships with their children to be that of brothers and sisters in Christ how might their attitudes to their children and their parenting practices change?

### ***Some results and conclusions***

1. God's design from creation to eternity is that every human being has a community, the smallest being a family in which all members can develop and grow. A family is a gift or blessing.

2. This gift is messed up by sin.

3. Therefore there is no clean family.

4. We need to strengthen, support and help those families that already know Jesus. Family life can be a struggle and there is no guarantee that the next generation will follow Christ.

5. We need to be alongside and support families, especially those where there is pain or conflict. We need to nurture them towards greater wholeness. With God's help and guidance we need to strengthen them and not look in the first place for a change in the outer appearance.

6. The aim of the church of Jesus Christ is not first a 'moral right form of family'. Rather it is a change of the way of life connected to the change of the heart.

7. This means that the church of Jesus Christ has to find creative ways to reach families and households with the Good News so that they may be welcomed into God's family and know faith as well as kin relatedness.

8. Families will always be a mixed blessing because good and bad things happen in them – this applies to families that know faith-relatedness and those that do not. The difference between the two is that one knows forgiveness and the gift of hope that God gives to those who love him while the other does not.

### ***Questions for our Issue Group included:***

What do we see in Scripture about reaching families/households transcends time and culture? In other words what are the norms for all time? The group identified some general principles that apply to reaching people with the Good News from a holistic perspective - spirit, soul and body. We want to have Christ as our example. In addition, there are some principles that apply more specifically in the area of family life. These are:

1. We need to understand the cultural background the family is coming from - both related to faith issues and family issues. (We have to know, learn and discover the culture and the context.)

2. We need to listen well so that the agenda is being person and family led and not driven by our own agenda. (We need to allow them to set the agenda and we can offer a response to their agenda.)

3. As servants we need to analyse their situation in order to understand the questions with which they are struggling. We are inspired by Jesus and the ways He approached people by asking: 'What do you want me to do for you?' (We need to ask: 'What's the question?' Then listen and

analyse the situation – issues, time availability the need i.e. counselling/evangelism.)

4. We need to respect and accept people and their history - and - the conclusions they arrive at. (We need to treat people and their history with respect.)

5. The Good News will be shared with neighbours in incarnational ways through words and deeds. Developing relationships will be the basis. (Share the Good News through all channels – sin base? atonement base? need base?)

6. The church must equip people with relational skills. They will be needed for the wellbeing of their own families, for serving other families and in helping them to find Christ as Saviour.

7. Different gifts, abilities and life experiences are needed in the church in order to serve (untraditional) families with the Good News. We need to recognise and affirm the servants of Christ for whom they are and help them to function within their boundaries of skills, time and other resources. (We need to know our abilities and boundaries and to know who to link people with when specialist help is needed.)

8. We live with the tension between having a prophetic ministry - and - being part of a healing process. (Respect their decision.)

### ***In conclusion***

Our task is to offer the love of God to everyone, whatever family structure they are in. The reason we need to study different family structures is not to decide which of them are traditional or non traditional or right or wrong, godly or ungodly. We need to understand how best to reach families with Jesus' Good News. This work is God's work. We are invited to join Christ in his mission and it is a privilege to do so.

## 4. Theological reflection: another way

The group used two ways of doing theology. The first begins with the Bible (see chapter 3 above) and then applies it to the different situations. This method was familiar to all group members. The second method was less familiar, but it is the method that Jesus mostly used when he encountered people. It came as some surprise to realise that Jesus' encounters with people mostly began with their SITUATION, not with the Scriptures. He sometimes included the Scriptures later, but often He did not refer to the Scriptures at all

The group undertook a process that attempted to model itself on Jesus' own practice by starting with human experience in order to observe what is actually happening and to engage with it directly. The group collected case studies from different parts of the world – all true though names were changed to protect individuals. Then individuals prayerfully considered each questionnaire. They used imagination and empathy skills to gain insight into the dynamics of the family described in the case study and answered a series of questions. In this chapter we invite the reader to do the same.

### Task 1

Four case studies are given here. Please read one case study. Give yourself time to reflect on the family situation and try to analyse it - what is happening in the family; what is influencing the family from outside; what are the emotions that are being experienced in the family. When you have done that, imagine Jesus encountering this family. Answer the questions below making notes and then move on to the next case study.

### Questions

1. On meeting this family:
  - a) What might Jesus do?
  - b) How might he do it?
  - c) What would Jesus say and what tone of voice would he use?
2. Where do you see good (of God) and kingdom values being lived already in this family? There are usually some that are evident in families that would not claim to be Christian.
3. What does this family need and want?
4. How might Christian workers engage with this family appropriately?
  - a) by being
  - b) by doing
  - c) by saying?

### Case study 1

Place: Guyana

People: Molly (20) and Claude (22)

Situation: Molly and Claude met one Sunday when Molly was sitting on the sea wall. They enjoyed each other's company and agreed to see each other again. Claude had a cottage with one bedroom in the town. He was a builder. Molly was a dressmaker who lived with her parents. In a few months Molly was pregnant and she moved into Claude's house. When the baby was six months old she was pregnant again. Claude saw himself as the breadwinner. It was Molly's job to take care of the children and look after the home. His work took him out of town. He enjoyed it. Molly found that being a parent of two children under 18 months is demanding. She could no longer do her sewing job. Claude worked longer hours to provide for the family and was away from home for longer periods. Molly was alone with the children a lot of the time.

Whenever Claude came home he would propose to her. Molly always made an excuse. She no longer felt as attractive as she did when she first met Claude. She thought they could not afford to spend money on a wedding when they had two

children to care for. The money would be better spent on food for the children and on school books.

## **Case study 2**

Place: Kenya

People: Eunice (14) and Joshua (30)<sup>8</sup>

Situation: When Eunice was 14 she was told that some important visitors were coming to see the family. She would be required to cook for them. According to custom, Eunice and her sisters prepared and served the food, but they did not sit with the visitors. Children in Kenya are not supposed to hear the conversation of grown-ups. When the visitors had gone Eunice was called to her father and mother. She was informed that she would be married in three weeks time.

Eunice was devastated. She had just completed her Primary Education and dreamt of doing her Secondary Education, of having a good job and finding a good man later. The culture did not allow Eunice to disagree with her parents' decision. She did not know the man she was to marry. She had not met him.

Eunice had a traditional wedding and moved into the home of her husband's parents. They supported Eunice and Joshua, her husband financially. He did not have a regular job. By the time Eunice was expecting her third child the house was too small and the grandparents could no longer support Eunice and Joshua.

Eunice and Joshua had to find a home and make a living by selling the milk from the cows they were given. By the age of 22 Eunice had four children, did all the housework and childcare, milked the cows and took the milk to the market. Every day Joshua went to town in the morning and every evening he came home drunk. Joshua's mother kept criticizing Eunice. Eunice became more and more stressed.

There was some difficulty with the cows. Some died and the family had little food. Joshua did not notice. His mother criticized Eunice for not cooking good food for Joshua. She invited Joshua to her house for food each evening. Eunice and the children were hungry and she worried about the children's education. Eventually, the stress was so great that Eunice decided to quit the marriage and take the children with her. She had to find food, shelter and take care of the welfare of her family.

## **Case study 3**

3. Place: Mombassa

People: Eunice (mid 20s), and Joshua (39) and four children

Situation: Eunice was a hard-working mother of 4 children. She left her marriage to Joshua who was lazy and a drunkard. Her mother-in-law criticized her constantly.

Eunice got a job in a nursery because she had done well in her Primary Education. She was good at craft-work – making things to sell. She needed as much money as possible for her children's education. Soon she found she could make more money by selling things so she gave up work in the nursery. She moved to Mombassa where she could sell more craft-work and make money for her children's education. In order to do this she sent the children back to Joshua so that she could work longer hours. She also sent money to him regularly for the children's education.

Eunice soon found that there were other pleasures at the coast. She liked the social life, dancing and entertaining tourists. This meant she could make extra money. She sent it home to her family. A year later Eunice was ill. She had contracted Aids. There was no more financial assistance for the family. Eunice died. The mother-in-law took the burden of caring for the grandchildren. She encouraged Joshua to find another wife. He could not do so. Other people knew how Eunice had died. They

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<sup>8</sup> The case studies offered here have been used with the permission of The Mothers' Union © 2004. They form part of the Mothers' Union Parenting Group Facilitators' Course international and must not be reproduced by the reader. The Mothers' Union is an Anglican organisation with 4.7 million members worldwide.

thought Joshua may be 'unclean'. They had also heard about the nagging, criticizing mother-in-law.

### **Task 2**

- Reflect on your responses to the case study questions. (By now you will have realised that case studies 3 and 4 are about the same family at different stages of its family life cycle)
- What reactions (feelings and thoughts) did you have to the situations described in the case studies?
- What did you see that was good?
- How might you or other Christians have tried to reach these families before doing this exercise and how might you want to adjust practices in the future?
- What new insights have you gained from this exercise a) about families and b) about how families such as these may be reached with Jesus' Good News?

### **Responses and connections**

In addition to the principles identified earlier, further connections were made in response to considering 14 case studies that described the realities of family life for a range of people. Here are a few of them.

1. Families are complex and so are their situations. In order to reach them with the Good News we will need to work in a variety of ways and at different levels – with individuals, the whole family, churches, community groups, local and national government using action and prayer. Christians with different giftings and sometimes with others from outside the church will work on different aspects of this process – family educators, relationship counsellors, befrienders, health workers, teachers, ministers, church members local councillors, village chiefs, politicians and of course, evangelists.
2. Every family is unique. What works with one family may not work with another. Sometimes there are no 'blueprint' or 'quick-fix' solutions but every family we are alongside will require time.
3. Actions speak louder than words. How we do or say things sometimes has more impact than what we do or say. Jesus modelled 'best practice'. He acted and spoke. Words and deeds go together
4. Jesus is incensed by injustice, the misuse of power and resources. He meets hurting families with understanding, compassion and mercy. He challenges and rebukes when necessary – especially those with power and authority.
5. Often families or individuals within them are innocent victims who are sinned against. We remember that Jesus died to save the world, which includes fallen structures and traditions that are unhelpful for families.
6. No family, however messy, is beyond God's reach and love. There is hope for all families Our task is to reach them sensitively, through our deeds and words and with love, working for justice and good environments that promote family well-being.
7. Families need opportunities to respond. As Paul and Silas told the jailer, '*Put your trust in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household*' and they were (Acts 16.31).
8. The Good News that is communicated needs to be holistic. Jesus is the Prince of Peace (*shalom*) whose Good News is the Gospel of Peace (*shalom*). Sometimes we lose the meaning of this word and along with that it is possible to lose our vision of the vastness of the Gospel of Shalom we seek to communicate.  
*Shalom*: the meaning includes covenant, peace, justice, righteousness, harmony, unity, right relationships, well-being, welfare, wholeness, health (physical, emotional, mental and spiritual) blessing and greeting, friends, mutuality, give and take (or reciprocity).

### **Create your own case studies for education and training purposes**

If you have found this exercise valuable you might like to create your own case studies to help members of the church or community to understand and relate with families that are different from their own. The case studies might include families that are going through a fracturing process that is affecting children and adults, or families meeting natural milestones that create challenges for the family and require the family to adjust the way it functions. Such case studies can be a helpful aid when training Christians to reach out to families.

## **5. GROWING, DISCIPLING AND EDUCATING**

### **Introduction**

Thinking about the concept of a non-traditional family brings up the question about the definition of a family and of a traditional family. What are we talking about? Do traditional families exist? In this chapter we seek to describe these concepts and will take a closer look at the biblical principles that God has given us regarding three different important issues in family life: growing, discipling and educating. We will try look at some roadblocks and how we can deal with them and will outline some tools and activities to help families, traditional or non-traditional, to improve their task of growing, discipling and educating.

### **Family: trying to define**

A couple of years ago *Life* magazine in the US published a special edition on the American family. The editors tried to describe an image of the family in the 'good old days' what ever that means. The earlier type of family as they described it seems like a dream. In the dream the mother does not work outside the home. She is the stay-at-home factor in the family. She carries a plate of homemade cookies and some nice drinks for refreshment. Dad knows everything. He is so straight, so tame, so tall, so knowing. He is at home! In the dream, the children are only a little bit more mischievous than the dog. The dinner table groans, the moon and stars twinkle overhead in the sweet-smelling night<sup>9</sup>.

The only problem with this picture is that it is a dream. It probably never existed, at least for most people. The reporter in the magazine concluded that there was no such thing as a normal family in the past and there are none now. Gary Collins stated, "*People who care deeply about families and are committed to strengthening family sometimes urge us to return to the days of traditional families. As we read depressing statistics and encounter more and more reports about family decline, we look backward to the way we think families must have been in the past. Many among us long for a return of traditional family values and wish that we could re-establish traditional families in our homes and communities. But what is a traditional family?*"<sup>10</sup>

To understand families and family problems we need to take a closer look at what might be considered as a traditional family although that differs from one culture to another. Two concepts that need to be introduced here are *nuclear family* and *extended family*.

The *nuclear family* refers to at least a mother and her children. Almost always it includes a father as well. The people in the nuclear family are related by blood, kinship and/or legal ties. They live together in the same residence.

The *extended family* includes all the people that have the common great-grandparents. This means that an extended family includes aunts, uncles, cousins and other relatives. Sometimes, in some cultures, they live together in one home.

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<sup>9</sup> The American Family: There Is No Normal, *Life*, Collector's Edition: Getting to the Heart of the American Family 15, No.5A, (1992).

<sup>10</sup> Gary R. Collins, *Family Shock, keeping families strong in the midst of earthshaking change*, (Wheaton IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995).

Traditional families are often so called by people who see the family problems in their society and want something better. The following definition from a sociology professor gives a good definition of what most people mean by a traditional family (from the perspective described above). *'A family situated apart from both the larger kin group and the workplace; focused on the procreation of children; and consisting of legal, lifelong, sexually exclusive, heterosexual, monogamous marriage, based on affection and companionship in which there is a sharp division of labour, with the female as full-time housewife and the male as primary provider and ultimate authority.'*<sup>11</sup>

This definition feels like the dream mentioned earlier. Some Christian writers suggest that this kind of traditional family is the family as God intended and they prefer and urge others to return to this fading way of relating. However, most families in the Bible or in history could not be described as this type of traditional family and the word never applied to many families in many parts of the world. The traditional family as called here may be described as a middle-class, white family which we may have had for only a short part of our history.<sup>12</sup>

We also have to realize that those idealized traditional families had more problems, frustrations and weaknesses than we believe they had.

### ***Is there a Biblical family?***

Families are not discussed much in the Bible. On the other hand we can find several guidelines that can help us to define the concept of family.

The scriptural family involved a man and a woman who were married to each other and sexually faithful. Sometimes the couple was childless, but most often they had young or grown children. Siblings and extended family members were assumed to be a part of the larger family (Genesis 46:27; Acts 7:14).

The Bible says little about adoption families, but it shows that believers are adopted by God as members of His family. (Romans 8:14-17; 2 Corinthians 6:18)

Unrelated people who live together may be as close as family members, but technically they are not family. In biblical times slaves and servants were not family even if they lived in close proximity. Scripture gives no comment about working fathers or full time housekeeping mothers and no definition of a traditional family and no seeming interest in whether a non-traditional living arrangement like the one Naomi had with her two daughters-in-law is really a family. Sometimes the Bible uses the word family in ways that go far beyond the traditional family that is often discussed today.<sup>13</sup>

So it is not so important whether or not there is a traditional family, a non-traditional family or a Biblical family. The fact is that everybody belongs to a family and that a family as intended by God has several important functions.

### ***The function of the family***

Families are connected to one of the most important mandates of the church, namely discipling. Parents and not Sunday school teachers, teen workers or youth leaders, are the major disciplers of the church's children. Studies show that Christian education programmes are relatively ineffective unless at least one of the parents is a Christian. In other words, the family is an agency of Christian education.

This is in accordance with Deuteronomy 6:4-7: *'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.'*

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<sup>11</sup> David Popenoe, "The Family is in Decline," *Family in America*, ed. Wagner and Swisher, 18

<sup>12</sup> Gary R. Collins, *Family Shock, keeping families strong in the midst of earthshaking change*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Idem

This is said to parents. It is really important to understand what these verses mean. It has to do with the fact that children learn by example, by what they see more than by what they hear. The first thing that parents should realize is that in their family they are the ultimate example. Therefore they need to have God's commandments in their hearts otherwise it will never touch the lives of their children. God is a God of generations, He never only thinks in the present time. It is always past, present and future. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In Psalm 78 we read: *"what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done..."*

In Ephesians 5:4: *"Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."* Fathers are to discipline their children in the context of loving relationships in which they respect their children, set a good example and share the faith stories. They are to act justly with their children.

As stated earlier the Bible never speaks about traditional family. Only tasks like the above mentioned are listed. The family is not to build the soul; God does that. Yet He planned to build the soul through what happens in the family. Parents need to see that their discipline and authority are functions of nurture to the spirits and souls of their children. These are not merely physical responsibilities. Nothing can happen through our body which is not an expression of our spirit. God's word becomes flesh in a smile, an encouragement, a spanking, a command, a rebuke, a discussion or even an argument. We cannot escape incarnation. We bring forth God to our children at all times. That is what fathers, mothers, grandparents, families and the church should realise! It all belongs together: individuals to families to churches to Gods family.

### **Living Christianly**

What is the main goal of a family? It is to live together in harmony and to glorify God. Romans 8:19 says: *'The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.'* That is about God's children who should show the world that living in accordance with God's rules and principles brings forth fruit. Therefore, it is so important that:

- families train themselves to live Christianly
- husbands and wives know what it really means to have a Christian marriage
- children are raised with respect for God, parents and other people
- children live with the presence of a loving father and mother
- families realise that it is their duty to open the door of their home to welcome others as Christ taught us by sharing hospitality.

The church has a major role to play in teaching the families in the church how to live Christianly in a world that drifts away from God faster and faster. To save the world, there is only one option: it is through Christ. What a responsibility!

### **Roadblocks and activities**

Where does the idea come from that the family is no longer society's cornerstone and that the family is an old-fashioned concept? I believe that this is caused by several factors. Firstly, we can point out marriage problems for which divorces are the best proof. There is more to say about this subject, however. If you ask the average teenager about his/her dreams for the future, (s)he is likely to dream about a fairy-tale marriage and family. This is even true for young people nowadays! Of course, reality is often not a dream and if there is no foundation you can fall back on as well as no guidance in dealing with disappointments in marriage, a divorce is often the only way out. Communication and empathy are important aspects of a good marriage. If these components are lacking or underdeveloped, problems are just around the corner.

The idea that the family is an old-fashioned concept is also rooted in the fact that the development of the individual has been emphasized over the past years. If

something is promoted frequently and convincingly enough and if people see short-term positive results, it is often readily accepted.

The third cause lies within the families and is closely connected with the marriage problems indicated earlier. Of course, marriage problems also occur in families that also have children.

The statistics are clear: millions of minors experience their parents' divorce. It is obvious that these children are traumatized because their foundation has been shaken and their basic sense of security permanently has disappeared. Although there has been much controversy about the possibly negative effects of divorce on children, the general notion has become that divorce has adverse effects on children. Statistics show that children of divorced parents have eighty per cent more chance of their marriages ending up in divorce than children of parents who have not been divorced. If this is true, it is not hard to imagine the picture such children have of the family. In their case, the family has definitely not been a cornerstone!

For several years, there has been a lot of discussion and controversy about random acts of violence in society. Gradually, we are beginning to understand that it is useless to attempt to financially deal with this problem. We should discipline people more. The question arises, however, who is responsible and for what areas. Children's education in Western society at least is incredibly pressured because there is no time for it, anymore. Parents are looking for professional ways to care for their children: children's day care centres expand their services with doing groceries, ironing and such to relieve the pressure on parents, but what becomes of a family? Who is raising the children? We obviously should not generalize everything, but this is a real social problem that can only be solved in one way: parents should realize again that their children are number one in their lives. This means that parents should understand that they have to make sacrifices for their children. This, however, goes straight against the individualistic tendency in our Western society.

You can also distinguish the connection with society. Society consists of individuals and families. If we wish to change society, we have to start with the individual. Society starts with you! There is another important aspect, however. Society also consists of people that have to learn to live with each other within the framework of families. Churches have an enormous task (and mission) in this area.

### ***Solutions and opportunities***

Society is reaping the bitter harvest of a failing family policy. There is countless research that makes a connection between current criminal behavior, vandalism, random acts of violence and other social derailments and the lack of parenting skills within families. The effects of these problems are even noticeable in the area of professional care. Children base their identities on their parents' identities, but if parents are inadequate or not available, serious problems occur.

We have to go back to our Creator's original principles. Because He is Our Creator, He knows best! Therefore, children should be born within a relationship between man and woman. That is the way He created it to be. Apart from that, God gave us His word to raise those children in a way that will bring them happiness. The fact that this often does not work is caused by the world's brokenness on the one hand and by our unwillingness to live radically according to Our Creator's word on the other hand. We think we know better. There is, nevertheless, a solution to the problem! We have to fall back on God's guidelines for the family and children's upbringing. This is not only the best solution from a spiritual point of view. From a psychological and an educational point of view, it has also become increasingly clearer that we have to fall back on God's principles in order to find a solution for our derailed society. All other solutions are only surrogates and will be inadequate.

### ***Tasks***

Reflect on the following:

- No family is perfect, but we can aim towards being families that function more Christianly. With God's help, what does that mean in terms of:
  - relationships (adult/adult, adult/child and child/child)
  - time, money and resources
  - worship of God and sharing of the faith stories
  - our extended families, neighbours and communities?
- What are the blocks that prevent families with Christians in them from functioning Christianly?
- What adjustments to family lifestyle might be necessary in your home, church and community cultures?
- What images of God (positive and negative) do children perceive through their parents' behaviours?
- In what ways has family life encouraged or challenged you (an adult) to grow and be discipled?
- How is your family?

## 6. BEING ALONGSIDE FAMILIES THROUGH CHANGE

One of our challenges in working with the topic of 'Reaching non traditional families' was to examine how long a 'reach' is best suited to this ministry. Our case studies revealed a wide range of possible positions for the local church, to adopt in relation to the families it is seeking to reach.

The basic related questions are how much personal involvement is required and at what depth. Do we best observe the family changes from an objective distance or do we engage with them at a pastorally close range? Is our evangelistic ministry more effective when we position ourselves alongside a family or can we be just as effective if we stand back? How well do we need to know the family members? How well, if at all, do they need to know us?

As we examined our case studies we increasingly saw the value of being closely alongside a family over an extended period of sustained involvement. Families going through change, especially those which are changing - or have changed - from a traditional to a non-traditional form, were found to need a *short-reach but long-haul* engagement from those seeking to minister to them.

### ***Families are in a process of change***

All families, of whatever formation, are in process of change. Change is to be expected and desired because all growth necessitates change. Whether a family is traditional or non-traditional every change it experiences will contain negative as well as positive possibilities. Some changes are more painful than others and some are much harder to negotiate. Some are chosen and can therefore be planned while others come upon the family without warning – unplanned, unsought and unwelcome. Some changes cause a damaging sense of powerlessness and powerlessness always carries potential for harm. The future ramifications of any person being rendered powerless should never be underestimated.

The changes experienced by non-traditional families in any culture bring particularly challenging pressures. We concluded that churches best understand these challenges if one or more of their members position themselves near at hand to these families, close enough to observe them carefully and to develop an understanding of them.

### ***Jesus let them set the agenda***

We saw it as essential that the local church also be prepared to learn from these families. Jesus did not need to learn about the situations He encountered. Nor did He need to develop sympathy for the people He met – He already loved them with an everlasting love. Jesus automatically brought both understanding and compassion to every encounter of need. Yet Jesus, with all those insights, astonishingly said to those people in need '*What do you want me to do for you?*' The Son of God let *them* set the agenda!

Those of us who are following Jesus today rarely have the grace to ask that question of those we sincerely want to help. Instead we decide what it is that people need and we confidently go ahead and impose it on them. However, we should never take for granted that we have either a fully informed understanding or a godly sense of compassion.<sup>14</sup> Certainly we do not possess these qualities to the maturity level and ministry potential of Jesus. Yet being alongside families without such assets can cause havoc. In seeking to reach families for Christ we might further imprison them within our own shortcomings. Instead of releasing them into freedom we might lay heavy burdens upon them.

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<sup>14</sup> Robin George Collingwood (1869-1943) was a British philosopher. To explore his thinking and further evaluation of it see: Gary Browning, [Rethinking RG Collingwood: philosophy, politics and the unity of theory and practice](#), (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

We began to understand some of this risk through the experience of Issue Group members whose own fathers are polygamous. In some instances the gospel message to such families was accompanied by an insistence that the men must immediately revert to having only one wife. This resulted in many women and children being cast aside and exposed to considerable survival danger. The good features of protection, care, food and shelter, which already existed in polygamous families, were ignored.

***Listen and learn respectfully***

Being prepared to learn respectfully from non-traditional families will limit our potential for harming them. One essential aspect of this is to recognise the positive features, which already exist in each family to which we are hoping to minister. If we approach this learning process humbly we will find that some features of that family already reflect aspects of God's image and purposes for human relationships.

An important insight for us in this regard was that change, which does not retain the best features of what is being changed, does not lead to progress. Churches seeking to bring about productive change will need to:

1. Make a respectful appraisal of the good features that already exist in each family. Although this would best be done in co-operation with the family itself great sensitivity would of course be needed if any survey of this kind were to be attempted. The approach would have to be made naturally, in ordinary conversation, rather than conducted as a clinical assessment by experts! (If handled insensitively it could be a disastrous example of the harm Christians can do.)

2. Assess with the family how best these good features can be retained and safeguarded during any changes. Some of these changes might be:

- from marriage to separation or divorce;
- from singleness to co-habitation or marriage;
- from marriage or co-habitation to singleness;
- from polygamy to monogamy;
- from 'nuclear' families to lone parent to blended families;
- from childlessness to IVF treatment or fostering or adoption;
- from parent-led families to child-led families;

or to decimated families as a result of some traumatic catastrophe (through climate, terrorism, military coup or other disaster).

Then there are the inter-faith, inter-racial, inter-tribal or same sex families, with and without children. Each family structure will contain good features, which need safeguarding.

3. Run a constant internal check on the range of definitions of 'good', which everyone involved, might be using. Even the Christians in the process might be defining 'good' differently from each other, which makes for a tricky situation! However committed we are to our own definition, it is inappropriate for any definition of 'good' to be imposed by one person on any other. God gives us free choice, all the time and we need to give it to others also. Somehow the various 'goods' will not only have to be acknowledged as existing, but as having perceived importance to someone in the process.

***Being alongside: a case study***

With all these challenges in mind, we found ourselves giving particular attention to one case study, which happened to embody many of the changes listed above. In this case study we have a same-sex partnership which includes the elements of divorce, co-habitation, inter-faith, stepchildren, inter-race, atheism, a strong personal faith and a maze of inter-generational combinations.

While on the streets as a teenager, having suffered long-term sadistic abuse by her father, a young woman had been invited to join the local church choir by a very traditional Christian couple. They had befriended her and offered her consistent acceptance and kindness. This church became her family. While later attending a ministry training course as a young adult she got to know the course leader well and

within a few years was to adopt her as her surrogate mother. Soon after the ministry course finished the young woman had two difficult experiences. Her sister's boyfriend raped the young woman and another young man stalked her. In need of safety she went to a women's refuge where she was befriended by one of the social workers. This woman was divorced and was bringing up two young children on her own. Her background was Roman Catholic, but she had become disenchanted by what she saw to be outrageous hypocrisy in the lives of Christians. She had a high level of integrity and a strong social conscience. The young woman and this social worker became friends and within a year or so had entered into a committed partnership. Their relationship is very affectionate, but they are not sexually intimate.

Over the past twenty years the Christian leader has become an honorary member-on-the-margins of this extending family, learning a great deal herself from the whole experience. She has been surprised and impressed by the quality of loving support, which the members give to each other and by the family's capacity to integrate very complex differences. While she reaches out to them they also reach out to her, with a loving and even protective concern.

By respecting the family members who have not embraced the Christian faith she has gained their permission to discuss spiritual matters frankly. She has acknowledged the truth of many of their criticisms of Christians and of the official church. A fascinating development has been the recent ordination of the younger woman as an unpaid minister. The whole family attended the ordination service and is functioning with grace and increasing openness towards a faith position, which they previously resisted strongly and with some cynicism.

The many good features in this family were honoured and fostered. Each person was respected for the integrity of the decisions they were making. We offer this 'work-in-process' as an example of good practice for your consideration.

### **Tasks**

#### **•Questions for the local church**

1. What do we mean by the term 'non-traditional'.
2. Does our definition contain any judgement?
3. What do we consider, in general, to be the 'good' (or Godly) features of any family?
4. Which of these features might be found in non-traditional families?

#### **•Inventory questions for the local church**

1. With which non-traditional families do we currently have a link?
2. What sort of link is it and how did it start?
3. How well do we know these families?
4. Who sets the agenda in our dealings with them?
5. What new understanding have we gained of what it feels like to be in their situation?
6. Did we think to make any assessment of the good features in this family when we met them? Have we been committed to safeguarding these?
7. What harm might we have already done, unintentionally, to this family? (Would we consider asking them this question and apologising to them, if required?)
8. What ministry are we seeking to have to this family?
9. How will we go about it from now on?

#### **•Reflection**

A family is a jig-saw of personalities, backgrounds, beliefs, needs and hopes. Families can provide a unique opportunity for personal growth within a supportive environment. Family ministries have the extraordinary privilege of coming alongside a family to offer gospel blessings by gospel means. A 'short-reach but long-haul

consistency' can lead to genuine progress for both that family and for the kingdom of God.

As you read subsequent chapters you may ask: what does 'a short reach but a long-haul consistent approach' mean for those who work with families like this? How does it vary from family to family and/or culture to culture?

## 7. WEALTHY KIDS AND FAMILY UPHEAVAL

Children are tomorrow's future – they are our hope. Happy, laughing, kicking a ball, climbing trees, running around -many are happy, but what about those who are sad, depressed, confused, etc. When there are family breakdowns or new households created, children may react by having psychological problems.

So often the world sees lovely homes/mansions and gardens and thinks: 'Wow!' But stop! What is under those roofs? They may appear to be lovely, with everything money can buy. Often, however, there are hurting people, especially hurting children living in luxury who arrive at school cranky, crying and depressed, taking out their unhappiness on others in an aggressive manner – physically, verbally or in subtle emotionally damaging ways.

### ***A search for belonging***

Society is searching for a sense of belonging and purpose. The security this brings can change the character of the power-searching person to one of contentment. We chase big houses and shop-shop-shop till we drop. This does not bring happiness. Adults are often too busy, rushed or stressed to have time to help and listen to their children. No wonder young teenagers get into sex, drugs, alternative lifestyles, etc – trying to find meaning.

One member of the Issue Group outlined how she<sup>15</sup> as a teacher had seen children near collapse because of home problems. The causes are usually to do with difficult transitions that the family is making. When their parents marriage breaks down children often feel that they are 'in the middle', pulled in different directions by parents who are competing for their love and custody. Sometimes they feel responsible for the situation and carry great emotional burdens. Life changes dramatically when they have to live between their parent's homes. Packing an overnight bag becomes a routine! This is true also for children whose parents have co-habited and then broken up.

The pervasive attitudes of market capitalism are corrupting our emotional lives. Being a loving parent, companion, friend often goes by the wayside in the rush of everyday life and the acquisition of more possessions. Watch the child trying to talk to its parent – 'I haven't got time, 'I am busy', or 'I am on my phone'. We have lost the capacity to listen and hear across the generations.

Imagine what life is like for children who live through the process of their parents' divorce, then adjust to lone parenthood with the occasional weekend with the other parent and then have to make further adjustments on the remarriage of a parent. Often the child lacks information. There are mixed up weekends divided between relations and complications of new family arrangements. Suddenly there are older siblings, same age siblings, more grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins – often experienced as a bonus. Children go about their daily tasks, school, sport, extra-curricular lessons and sometimes do not have the chance to speak about something that is tearing them apart. Parents are trying to survive so they cannot help their children. In blended families, children are 'here part time, full time, some time'.

### ***Stressed children***

This stress in children manifests itself in various ways. So often parents have gone soft on caring discipline and children have rejected the concept of respect. This is seen at school every day, e.g. children pushing through doors scattering teachers aside. Take the case of a boy, who for months came to his piano lesson and half way through, said, 'I can't see'. Assessments found nothing physically wrong – stress was the reason in an extreme form where the eyes clouded over and seemed to be saying, 'enough is enough'.

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<sup>15</sup> Florence Smith (Australia)

While much stress is created by the difficult transitions as a result of marriage and partnership children from happy, relating families are also showing signs of stress – parental values, speed/hurry, pressures to achieve all have their effect.

***How would you cope with this situation?***

Two year old Olivia spends 4 days a week in family childcare alternating Fridays and Saturdays with her father and half a day with a family friend. When she is sick her grandmother drives from another city to mind her. The mother's life is spent organising where Olivia is supposed to be – constant pick-ups and drop-offs and explaining and checking. This child was taken out of a child care centre into a family care arrangement which has given her the security and relationships she needs.<sup>16</sup>

***The spiritual vacuum***

There seems to be a spiritual vacuum in and among many families. Australia's baby boomers have lost their sense of God and failed to pass on spiritual values to their children, spawning a second generation of aimless adolescents living without meaning, purpose and a sense of belonging.<sup>17</sup>

***In conclusion***

While there are many children who survive being part of a non-traditional family there are obviously many who do not and who are affected for a long time. Churches are well placed to support children and families and to be places of belonging for them. *'Dear friends, let us practise loving each other for love comes from God'*<sup>1</sup> John 4:7 (TLB).

***Tasks***

- In what ways is your church able to reach out in loving support to children and families that are negotiating difficult transitions.
- Discuss the similarities and differences between reaching wealthy families and poor families with the Good News.

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<sup>16</sup> Sydney Morning Herald, 23 September 2004

<sup>17</sup> Peter Jensen, Archbishop of Sydney, quoted in Sydney Morning Herald, 23 September 2004

## 8. Blending families

In this chapter we are considering one expression of what may be called from a 1960's Western perspective, 'a non traditional family', namely the *blended family* or *stepfamily*.

A *blended family* is a second (or third, or fourth) committed relationship for one or both parties in which there are children from previous relationships and possibly children from their own union. In the past this was often called a step family. The word 'step' in stepfamily comes from the old English word "steop", which means loss or orphaned and was used to describe the remarried family formed as a result of death. The terms re-partnered, step, blended, reconstituted, remarried, synergistic have all been used at various times to describe what we are discussing. In a stepfamily the children may live in the household full time, or 'visit' on a regular basis, or only have irregular contact with their parent and step-parent.

Until the 1970's divorce was rare in Western countries. During the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the majority of marriages ended with the death of a spouse. Remarriage as a result was common. Nowadays, life expectancy is much longer and therefore the potential for marriages to last for many decades has increased. However, other forces have come into play that have made life time marriage more the exception than the rule. Furthermore, marriage itself is not as common as it was before the 1970's. The trend of co-habiting before marriage has drastically increased over the last decade and this has changed the nature of committed relationships. Couples often now choose to re-partner in a variety of ways. Some formalise their new relationship in marriage. Others live together without being married. Some choose to 'live together apart.' They commit themselves to each other, but live in separate households often because of complications with the children. Often the step-parent is seen not as a replacement of the biological parent, but as an additional or social parent. However, when there is a death of a partner the new step-parent may be seen as a replacement parent.

### Tasks

- What do we do to include step families within our Church family?
- Do they feel safe to discuss some of their difficulties or do they feel judged and shamed that they may be different from more 'traditional families'? Discuss.

### Step family myths

Gerrard and Howden<sup>18</sup> list 'myths' about stepfamilies. How many of these myths do we hold ourselves, even if subconsciously?

- A stepfamily is created instantly.
- Stepfamilies function much like biological families.
- All stepfamily members will, given time, love one another.
- Relating to stepchildren is the same as relating to biological children.
- All of the children in a stepfamily will get on together.
- Part-time stepfamilies where children 'visit' have it easier than full time step families where children 'live in'.
- Stepfamilies are headed by 'wicked stepmothers' or 'cruel stepfathers'.
- Stepfamilies formed after the death of a partner have fewer problems than those formed after divorce or separation.
- If stepchildren are treated kindly by their stepparent they will always respond well.
- The couple can love one another so much that problems creating a stepfamily will be easily overcome.

### Tasks

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<sup>18</sup> Gerrard and Howden, *Making Stepfamilies Work*, (Stepfamily Association of Victoria, Australia, 1998).

- Discuss these myths and reflect on how many you have held.
- How does this affect the way I relate to stepfamilies within my Church community and in my neighbourhood?

### ***Family of origin***

Many of us leave our families where we have grown up hoping to leave any hurts and losses behind and are surprised when they surface in our marriages especially when we have children. Some of us come from families which have already experienced separation, divorce and the pain involved. Others have experienced violence within their families and come with this learned pattern of relating. They seek to resolve conflict by force. However, some want to be different and break with past patterns. Others have learnt to avoid conflict at all cost. This too can be destructive for their relationship.

Each one of us has developed ideas about how people should behave and many of these have come from our experiences within our first family. Among them are the attitudes we have developed towards money (saving or spending), sexuality, conducting relationships and how conflict should be resolved. Furthermore, every family and every relationship has rules, some spoken and some unspoken. These rules are a set of expectations about how we should conduct ourselves in various kinds of settings and circumstances. These too have roots in our family of origin.

### ***Tasks***

Consider these questions.

- What were the spoken and unspoken rules in your family of origin about handling differences and conflicts between family members?
- What are the rules for conflict in your partner's family of origin and how do they differ from yours?
- How do these spoken and unspoken rules affect our relationships within our Church community?

### ***A new relationship***

Many people come into a new relationship with unresolved emotional baggage from their family of origin and past relationships. Unless they work through this agenda they are not free emotionally to go into another relationship because there is too much baggage for the present relationship to work.

Fisher<sup>19</sup> talks about the grief and loss experienced in a separation, the anger and the sense of guilt felt when you are the 'dumper' and the sense of rejection if you have been 'dumped'. He also discusses the difference between being lonely, the feeling of coping with aloneness and rushing into a rebound relationship. What he emphasises is that self-worth is invariably eroded when a relationship ends. Afterwards there is a need to understand and develop one's own identity and worth again. This is needed before a quality new relationship can be established.

So often a separation takes place when one party has an affair. Usually affairs take place in secrecy and often have an air of excitement about them. They meet the immediate needs of the two involved, but tend to be characterised by unreality.

Sometimes new relationships get sabotaged due to the couple being at different life stages. For example, one may have children who have grown up and left home, but the other in the partnership has children in the middle of schooling. Sometimes, it is due to one having just left the relationship and is still working through the issues of divorce, maintenance, children and so have no real emotional space for a new relationship.

When one partner has children from a previous relationship and the other does not, the one with children can experience a sense of loss when the new partner and stepchildren do not form a close bond (or even like each other). This is particularly so

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<sup>19</sup> Bruce Fisher and Robert Alberti, Rebuilding: When a Relationship Ends, Impact Publishers.

if the partner has died and the biological parent is expecting the new stepparent to fill the role of the dead parent. There is also a sense of loss for the 'first time' partner about couple time, money going to their partners' ex. One person described it as '*We didn't have a courtship. As a couple you have to court the children.*' These partners also miss out on the important first time experiences. For example: first wedding, first honeymoon, first home, first baby; all things that their partner has done before. Sometimes these feelings can be heightened when the new couple have their own child.

### **Tasks**

- How can we, as a Church, understand and support stepfamilies?
- Do we need to facilitate or organise a 'Making stepfamilies work' for our church and wider community?
- Could we offer child care facilities so that stepparents could attend a course to explore ideas for strengthening their families?

### ***Disciplinary issues in stepfamilies.***

Already we have looked at how our family of origin generates spoken and unspoken rules and taken for granted beliefs that impact on our marriage relationships, whether it be a first, second or third marriage. Some of these issues are:

- Step-parents have different attitudes towards discipline some are very strict others will be non-directive and laissez-faire in their style of discipline.
- Step-parents have developed different values that then determine their attitudes about discipline.
- Often children in a stepfamily have experienced a certain standard and style of discipline which they are familiar with and therefore they resist new rules and methods.
- Resentment towards the 'intruder' (the step-parent) because they are trying to take their biological parent's position.
- Different rules can take place for different sets of children.
- A power struggle can take place between divorced parents or between parent and step-parent over discipline.
- A parent may feel threatened and insecure and so become inflexible in their discipline.
- Inadequate time spent with stepchildren or biological children can mean that a trusting relationship is not developed. Therefore, the children will not take notice of the step-parent.
- Divided loyalties on the part of the children towards step-parent and wanting to be loyal to the absent parent.
- Communication skills need to be very skilled in these complex relationships; partner to ex-partner, new partner and biological and stepchildren.
- Sometimes there is a lack of support from a partner in forming a positive relationship with his or her children.
- Step-parents whose children live elsewhere often experience a deep; sense of loss, guilt and anger, and this contaminates their relationship with their stepchildren.

### ***Men in stepfamilies***

Re-partnering with children is hard work for everyone, parents, stepparents and children. Many men find themselves in the unfamiliar role of primary care-giver for their children as well as provider. As a consequence many dads feel very alone with the responsibility of parenthood, and uncomfortable with the divided loyalties commonly experienced in stepfamilies. They experience a strong sense of being caught or trapped 'in the middle'. They have to negotiate decisions with their ex-partner, present one and children and possibly her children as well. A traditional male self-reliant, technical 'fix-it' approach to problems is often not enough to develop new stepfamily relationships.

Many men expect that the new female partner will take over the primary care-giving and that he will become the back-up care-giver again. Conflict within the

blended family often arises when the children miss the closeness to their dad that they had when he was alone. When stepfathers have not been parents themselves their understanding of the parenting role often comes from their own upbringing. If a disciplinarian approach was used they may express frustration that their partner is 'too soft' on the children. They ignore the structural changes in parenting styles from one generation to the next and how different stepfamily roles are.

Many stepfathers combine the roles of part-time biological father with being a stepfather to their partner's 'live-in' children. This means they sometimes have a greater opportunity for input into the lives of their stepchildren than their own children. It is important to recognise the problems and tensions that step-parenting can generate, but also see its potential.

### ***Women after separation***

Women often find themselves with the children and managing the household with a reduced low income. Some need to return to full time work and the issue of care of the children and the cost raises huge issues for these women. Some women decide that they could not trust another male if their partner has had an affair and so decide to go it alone. Others develop a rebound relationship, which often does not work. This can be due to loneliness, difficulty managing alone with children, or the financial situation.

The struggle with finances and trying to give the children the same social activities that they had before the separation is a constant problem for most women who are separated. This is an issue that comes into a new stepfamily when that is developed.

### ***Tasks***

Reflect and discuss

- When someone mentions the term, blended or stepfamily what images, attitudes and feelings come to mind for you?
- The most striking thing about stepfamilies is how much more varied they are than first families. These differences can be a source of rich experiences within these families.

### ***Grandparents***

This is another area that changes when the first relationship breaks down. For some grandparents it is the end of their relationship with their grandchildren. For others it means a very limited contact and a lot of problems attached to visits.

### ***The good in stepfamilies***

Already we have looked at some of the difficulties that can be experienced when a stepfamily is developed so finally let us look at some of the positives that researchers have identified. Visher and Visher<sup>20</sup> point out the following lessons that step-families can teach all families.

- Stepfamilies can teach other families about dealing with loss and change.
- Stepfamilies can model appreciation, or at least acceptance of differences. (Stepfamily life offers a 'crash course' in diversity training).
- Stepfamilies learn to understand the importance of one-on-one relationships. In nuclear families loss of parental attention comes with the birth of another child, in stepfamilies it comes at the time of remarriage.

Some further positives are identified<sup>21</sup>.

- Children can see a happier and more 'workable' remarriage.
- Formation of a stepfamily gives another chance to be a family.
- Adults have hopefully learned important lessons in the first family.

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<sup>20</sup> *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 22:4 (1994).

<sup>21</sup> *Family Relations*, pp 43, 289-297, (Stepfamily Association of Victoria, Australia, 1994).

Stepfamilies themselves see some of the positives as,

- The stepparent is someone different, who the child may feel more able to tell things they could not tell the parent.
- There are more opportunities to expand horizons with a variety of relationships and interests and skills.
- Children can see a successful couple-relationship.
- You learn to be more realistic and tolerant.
- The advantages of having learned from past mistakes.
- Personal growth is enhanced.
- More role models for children.
- It can work!

### **Conclusion**

The stepfamily is complex. There are structural characteristics, which are unique to stepfamilies. They are listed below.<sup>22</sup>

1. There is no blood tie between some family members. This is a fundamental characteristic of all stepfamilies.
2. The stepfamily is born of loss; individuals have suffered important losses such as relationships, community, and their hopes for the original marriage and family.
3. All individuals in the stepfamily come together with previous family histories. Initially there are no shared family experiences or traditions.
4. The stepfamily is constructed differently. An adult (and possibly children) is added to a previously established parent/child relationship. The parent/child relationship predates the couple relationship.
5. There is a biological parent elsewhere in actuality or in memory, with power and influence over family members.
6. Stepfamily boundaries are unclear. Children are members of two households if they have contact with both biological parents. Parental authority, decisions and financial contributions are often shared between two households.
7. Step-parent/step-child bonding is not necessarily established. The major step-parent commitment is often to their partner not to his or her children.
8. Roles, which are not ascribed through a blood-tie, need to be achieved over time.
9. Membership in a stepfamily can be unclear and is defined by an individual's perceptions, which change over time.
10. Sexuality can be heightened – appropriately (between the new couple) or inappropriately (between other family members).
11. The legal situation in stepfamilies is ambiguous; little legal relationship exists between step-parents and stepchildren/ inheritance issues can be complicated.
12. Stepfamilies are often combining several family life cycle stages simultaneously e.g. bringing together teenagers and toddlers.

These differences mean that the stepfamily is structurally very dissimilar to both the nuclear and single parent family and that it is certainly considerably more complex than both of them.

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<sup>22</sup> Gerrard and Howden, Making Stepfamilies Work, (Stepfamily Association of Victoria, Australia, 1998).

## 9. REACHING POLYGAMOUS FAMILIES

### ***Introduction***

Polygamy has been practiced from time immemorial in Africa. It is firmly entrenched in African culture and tradition, especially among the Moslem community. There is generally no legislation against it, as in the Western world Tunisia being an exception. Polygamy means many women or many wives. The simplest form of it is bigamy. The most common form is polygyny whereby a man has two or more wives.

### ***Historical background***

In traditional Africa, polygamy was practiced for various reasons. With an agrarian or pastoral economy, wives and children provided free or cheap labour on the farms or to take care of the cattle and flocks. So the more wives and children a man has the greater his economic returns. Apart from serving as an index of wealth, it also served as a status symbol in society, and it determined the type of funeral rites to be accorded a man when he died. More importantly, the value placed on children, especially male children was such that barrenness or the giving birth to female children only by a wife usually compelled a man to marry another woman with the hope that male children might be born. Among the Yoruba nation of Nigeria, child bearing is the essential function of marriage. If a man was impotent, his next of kin went into his wife so that children might be born. If a wife was barren, she could personally arrange for another wife for her husband for the same reason. That is the reason why it was assumed in Africa that a barren woman would keep on trying to secure conception until menopause, that divorcees would remarry, everybody would seek some form of marital relationship as great value was placed on children.

Apart from the above, polygamy was promoted by the expectation that even if male and female children have been born to a man and his wife, the man should still exhibit his sexual prowess by seeking union with other women. In traditional Africa, men were discouraged from having sexual intercourse with their pregnant wives for the safety of the child from conception or birth to weaning at the age of about three years. Thus men who were unable to exercise self-control often married another wife, if they had the means, in order to have maximum sexual pleasure without lapsing into gross immorality. Today's knowledge that sexual intercourse during pregnancies is safe except in the case of threatened miscarriage was unknown in Africa. Unwanted pregnancies could not be prevented then as the traditional African society knew nothing about birth-control measures or adequate health and nutritional care. To prevent death of children whose nursing mothers could be pregnant, traditional Africans had to avoid their wives sexually until the babies were weaned.

Polygamy was also promoted in Africa by prolonged illness of one's wife and the practices of widow inheritance which the next of kin of the dead husband was bound to accept.

Urbanization and frequent travels or transfer of job may compel business men, civil servants and private sector workers to have another wife, or concubine in their new base of operation while leaving the first wife and children in their former station or in the family land. In some cases, the first wife or other wives may not know of her existence until, perhaps, after the death of the husband. Then she shows up at his funeral with her children.

Infant mortality is higher among the male than the female children in Africa. Wars, political assassinations, armed robberies have become widespread in Africa, occupational hazards also tend to deplete the male population faster than the female. The net result is that there are more females than males and this fact makes polygamy easier in those cultures that practice it.

The chronological age gap factor in Africa is also contributive to the flourishing of polygamy. Men marry relatively late in life while women marry relatively early. This age discrepancy more than anything else, provides an adequate pool of marriageable

females. Thus, there are always men of wealth and status to whom women are ready to act as second or third wife. The situation in Africa from the above stated factors is accentuated because the culture places such a high premium on marriage and procreation. For a person to remain unmarried or to be childless is mostly regarded as a curse from the invisible world.

Ignorance and faulty theology may be responsible for the confusion and discord, which surround Christian marriage in Africa in the different church denominations. There are still cases of polygamy among church members. In some denominations they are not allowed to take responsible roles in the church because of their family form. In others they are accepted although monogamy is encouraged for the next generation. A third group of denominations, mainly evangelical shut people out because of their marriages. Sometimes they insist on the abandonment of extra wives and their children.

### **Tasks**

Reflect and discuss:

- Is there any biblical basis for the insistence of the foreign missionaries and the church they founded on monogamy?
- How are we to understand the cases of polygamy in the Bible?
- Is the practice of polygamy in Africa solely a matter of culture and tradition about which the Christian should not bother?

This paper may have given the impression that most African marriages are polygamous. In fact monogamous marriages outnumber polygamous ones in all African states. However, for reasons suggested earlier many families with one woman and one wife are linked to polygamous families, their traditions and practices.

‘In ancient times, the Yoruba were mostly monogamic, not from any enlightened views on the subject, however, but rather from necessity, for although polygamy was not actually forbidden, yet only the rich folk could avail themselves of indulgence in that condition of life’<sup>23</sup>

### **Reaching polygamous families with the Good News**

Churches need to re-think how they reach out to Muslim families that are polygamous. Polygamous families do not feel accepted by the Evangelical, Gospel, and Pentecostal Church. The church will need to work without doubt and fear to seize any opportunity to be alongside the polygamous families with the Good-News. They should be reached with love and compassion. The cultural background of the African people being properly understood will give a clear picture of what its people are and have been doing. The message of love to these people will attract them as we accept them, the way they are. The church being an agency for change will gradually bring light into the lives of those being reached. The member of the Issue Group reporting on African families indicated that his father had three wives. Because the father was accepted in the African church it enabled the son to hear the truth being preached which “*finally, set me free.*”<sup>24</sup>

### **For further discussion**

- It is often said that the noises and quarrels of a multiplicity of wives could cause sorrow and put the world in a bad state. It is simply impossible to live among many wives and avoid saying the wrong things. Discuss.
- What might the Church of Christ do to bring polygamists (husbands, their wives and children) to know and feel the love of Christ and accept His glorious gospel?

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<sup>23</sup> Rev Samuel Johnson (Nigeria)

<sup>24</sup> Zacchaeus Odetokun (Nigeria)

- How would Jesus approach them – men, wives and children? Would He have followed the rules of some Christian denominations that require a polygamist who becomes a Christian to abandon all but his first wife and her children? What happens to the wives and children?

## 10. SIGNS OF HOPE

There are some exciting and creative things happening in family ministry. The good news is that many individuals, churches, organisations and agencies are at work. The bad news is that there are even more families outside the reach of these people at present. However, the climate is right for extending family ministry. There is such concern about changes that are occurring in the ways families form and function. That concern comes close to home. We are all family people, often struggling ourselves with parenting issues or family change, trying to negotiate family transitions and sometimes failing. This issue is very personal. It is not just about unreached families that are different. It is about your family and mine as it seeks to show and tell the Good News while knowing that the pictures others see are not always the experienced reality. So the first piece of good news is for us, Christians in families.

### 1. Nurturing families with Christians in them

There is an increasing recognition that families with Christians in them need nurture. They cannot reach out well without sustenance and this is available. Individual families are recognising this, so are churches, publishers and agencies. Look up the websites of *Scripture Union* or *Focus on the Family* and you will find resources to help you. One such resource is *Family Builders*. It is a programme that might work in many cultures – if not the content then the model will. Basically it is a programme based on Deuteronomy 6 and the heritage that parents bring into marriage and pass on to their children. The programme is also based on the relationships between parents and children and their respective responsibilities. Family Nights are an interesting exponent of the programme. A Family Night is a family experience in which a biblical principle is the centre of a creative time for parents and children together. Weekly programmes can be downloaded and reproduced for families. For more information see [www.family.org/church/hb](http://www.family.org/church/hb)

There is one pre-requisite for this. Families have to commit to setting time aside for this. This means that busy parents and children and other household members put family time into their diaries as a priority.

### 2. Creating community through all age or intergenerational work

In order to strengthen the families within, churches are supporting their families and households by building the Christian community into a living, relating faith community. This sometimes takes years, much prayer, laughter and sometimes heart-searching. Simple adjustments to the usual ways of doing things are necessary, e.g. making coffee time part of worship on a Sunday, providing a simple structure that enables people to meet each other and worship rather than worship in parallel not knowing the names of those around us.

Alongside these simple adjustments teaching and training are necessary. Clergy and church leaders need knowledge skills to facilitate/lead all-age learning and worship activities so that they can, with God's help, enable all ages to come together and become a practical, relating, serving community that worships one God. The New Testament pattern described in chapter 3 begins to become an experienced reality. This is especially so in societies where families are isolated and unsupported. With a supportive church community our families will be strengthened and individuals will find themselves valued by God and His people. This is happening in some churches where there is a sense that the local church really is a household of households.

Again websites are useful in discovering information about resources and training (resource people and course). Scripture Union, Churches Together for Families, Focus on the Family all carry information and have useful links.

### 3. Creating extended family through Family Clusters

They are a means of enabling a few households of different shapes, including one-person households, to come together, rather like an all age house group. They

form an 'extended family' that offers friendship and support household to household. They nurture friendships across the generations socialise, learn and worship together. They are good for introducing interested friends into the faith community too. A classic book for information and ideas is *Planning and Conducting Family Cluster*.<sup>25</sup> As one childless adult said, 'It is so good to have the children here. Without them in the group I would really have no significant children in my life.'

#### **4. Reaching out: household to household**

In Norway, the UK and other societies where families are often isolated and old lessons are being relearned, household members are being encouraged to be neighbourly, to invest time in friendship with families living down the street and to see this as important mission activity. The Navigators in Norway are helping Christians to do this in relationally appropriate ways. Again teaching and skills training are part of the preparation required for this work. It empowers all members of the Christian community to be involved in meeting families, becoming friends and sharing life, values and beliefs while respectfully accepting people who choose to believe differently.

Other churches have recognised mission opportunities for household to household work that have arisen in their localities. One church in the north of England developed a system whereby each family with Christians in it was linked to one without whose children were in the same classes at school. The local primary school was linked to the church. The mothers met at the school gate every day and the children were friends. The families shared concerns for their children's education. The families met. The children wanted to attend church activities, clubs and Sunday all age worship and the parents were happy as long as they did not have to be involved too. They knew which church family would take care of their children and that they would be safe – this was a particularly difficult inner city area. The commitment of the church to the children and the regular contact parents had enabled friendships to grow. Sitting next to me<sup>26</sup> at a church lunch a young boy said, 'My dads went fishing together yesterday.' Then he explained – "I have a church dad as well as my dad at home. My dad at home does not come to church, but he may do soon". Through the building of friendships, the sharing of interests and concerns, values and beliefs the scene is set. Do not think, however, that these friendships are just for the benefit of the non church families. The friendships have intrinsic value and are mutually beneficial as a safer more respectful community is built.

#### **5. Being hospitable**

After the birth of her first child a young Mum invited the members of her antenatal clinic to meet at her home. They got to know each other's babies and became firm friends. Their partners were introduced into the group. Interests were shared, social activities arranged. The children grew and became a network of friends going to different schools. The young Mum and her husband talked naturally about their faith and what Jesus has done for them. Members of the group respected them for that and for not 'pushing the gospel down our throats.' Over the years the group continued, supporting each other through family milestones sharing the good times and the bad. Some have been supported through marriage breakdown. Some have moved to other parts of the country, but they keep in touch and a significant number have become Christians along the way.

#### **6. Meeting shared needs/developing community**

One church had a baby boom. A number of its families were at the same stage of their family life-cycle. Mothers were at home often feeling isolated and missing adult

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<sup>25</sup> Vance, Barbara, *Planning and Conducting Family Cluster: education for family wellness*, (Sage Publications, 1989).

<sup>26</sup> Joan King

company. They decided to meet regularly. They began a Parent and Toddler Club and invited other families to join them – ones they met at antenatal clinic and at the shops. Many of them were lone parent families living on low incomes. Again many friendships were formed. The church was kept informed and provided prayer support and some practical help. Some older members offered to be actively involved by making coffee and by caring for children while the parents had some time out together – sometimes a speaker came or they shared their own interests, skills and expertise. The active older members of the church were energised by this work. The men found roles in mending toys and playing with the children alongside the women. They recognised that bringing up young children is hard work and that many of the families had little spare cash for treats. Some of the older folk enjoyed cooking. They suggested cooking a meal each week for the families and themselves. This suggestion was gratefully received. So every week the Toddler Group was followed by a meal at a beautifully prepared table. Older siblings were collected from the nearby school to join their parents and young brothers and sisters. So parents, children and ‘honorary grandparents’ sat at table together, chatted, shared stories and talk naturally about the meaning of life, their church and their faith. It was an appropriate development to begin a Bible Study group for interested parents and to invite them and their children to further church groups/activities. This community developed organically by the grace of God. Those who started the Toddler Group had no idea where it would lead. They took one step of faith to begin a group that would be beneficial to them and others in the wider community and they listened to God along the way.

## **7. A whole church approach to family ministry**

Some churches are working with a model similar to that described in chapter 3 – at home/household level, church level and in partnership with other churches in their area, nationally and internationally. Having gathered information about the age and household profile of their communities they plan accordingly. Sometimes they do a skills/gifting audit of their congregation. The church works at its corporate life, developing relationships, worshipping God in word and deed, caring and being pastorally appropriate. It aims to be a warm, welcoming worshipping community of faith-related people. All age and age-related activity is part of its programme.

The church uses its understanding of the family life cycle as a guide to planning its ministry with and to families. There are similar milestones that most families face at particular stages of the family life-cycle. At each stage there are emotional processes at work in the family and shifts in the relationships have to be made. The church aims to be there in some way at major milestones reaching out with God’s love in their support of families. At each stage there can be a way of marking the reaching of the milestone. Celebrations are planned into the church calendar to mark the transitions made.

Take, for instance one stage of family life, the family with adolescent children. At this stage the boundaries that the family had when the children were younger has to be revisited, to become more flexible so that they are appropriate for teenagers. The parent/child relationships need to adjust to allow teenagers to move in and out of the family so that they might be more independent. All this happens at a time when the young person is going through a rapid period of change. *‘The body grows up, the sexual drive awakens, the hormones make you crazy, the perception and the thought processes widen.’*<sup>27</sup> There are pressures from peers to conform and pressures from school/home to achieve. The teenager is leaving the safety of childhood and growing towards adulthood – soon s/he will leave the family home. It can be a bumpy ride.

Meanwhile the parents are also facing change and the issues of mid-life – marital and career issues, identity issues *‘Who will I be when the children have left home?’* This generation of parents is sometimes called ‘the stretched generation’

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<sup>27</sup> Tim Linder

because they are also concerned about the care of ageing parents or grandparents. So we see that the individuals in the family have their own challenges to meet and the family dynamics become very interesting.

The church concerned to reach families may choose a range of different ways. One church used the following:

- Community parents, in the form of youth workers to befriend and mentor young people
- A 'parenting teenagers' group for parents
- Teen and adult discussion/listening groups
- Dads and lads/Dads and daughters camps and the same for Mums
- Networked with other churches to provide a non alcoholic bar in the town
- Worked in partnership with other churches to provide a dependency drop in centre
- Met with local MPs and council officials to discuss and get action for youth and family service issues
- Included all age, sport and worship activities suitable for teens and parents together and apart.

Of course, all these activities include those who are Christians and those who are not. Friendships are built, new families reached and disciplined.

A church with a family focus in its mission work takes this approach with every stage of the family life-cycle. It seeks to strengthen families and is sensitive to their needs and to the needs of individuals in them. It does not idolise family but recognises the human need for it as part of God's intentions for us. It is household friendly and serves the community in Christ-like ways expressing genuine, practical love through its pastoral care and counselling work and it works prophetically through its evangelistic, teaching and training ministries. It is a prayerful, worshipping, relating, dynamic, vulnerable all age community that is firmly placed in the world that God loves. Where churches are working with this vision new families are coming to know Jesus.

## **8. A focus on parenting**

Parenting programmes are being developed across the world and churches have taken a lead in this. There is plenty of research available to show that parents benefit from well-facilitated groups.<sup>28</sup> The Mothers' Union trains facilitators to work at the grassroots helping parents to be more confident and to parent positively.

Currently, an international programme is being trialled in six African and West Indian countries by the Mothers Union. Issues of context and culture have been and continue to be addressed. A thorough monitoring and evaluation process is underway and responses are looking good. The programme model involves trainers and training facilitators to work with parents. All involved are people who are indigenous to the country in which they are working. It is hoped that the groups will help families and communities as they handle the effects of difficult experiences – genocide, child soldiers, rape, the effects of HIV/Aids – as well as the daily challenges that parenting brings. The programme seeks to strengthen parent or carer and child relationships. Once evaluated, and if found to be transferable to other contexts, the model currently in use may be extended to other countries at their request.

Resources for parenting groups are listed in the 'books and resources' section of this paper.

## **9. Working with interfaith families**

Many communities have within them interfaith families – Christian/Muslim, Jew/Gentile. Here we offer one example of painstaking work with one couple from the USA.

Donald is an African American. Sheila is Jewish. They were both in their early 20s and wanted to marry. They were skilled in relating cross-culturally so ethnicity was not their problem. Their challenge came when they squarely faced their religious differences.

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<sup>28</sup> G. Pugh, Confident Parents, Confident Children, (London: National Children's Bureau, 1994).

They met through their work place. She attended church with Donald. It was while at church, talking with Christian friends that Donald realised he could not marry Sheila. He was attracted to her, but their beliefs came between them. When told, Sheila was confused and hurt. She acknowledged that if Donald had spoken to her about personal faith in Jesus earlier in the relationship, she would not have returned his telephone calls.

Sheila broke off all contact with Donald. However, she continued to attend a church. Something in her experience with Donald had made a connection with her. Subsequently she went on-line and read the New Testament portions to investigate the Christian message in order to satisfy her curiosity. Christians from the local church were alongside Sheila during this period. Eventually she came to faith in Jesus the Messiah. Donald was among the first people she told. Eighteen months later they were married in a ceremony that incorporated culturally Jewish and Christian religious symbols in the hope of communicating their identities to their respective families.

This story has a wonderful conclusion. The point of telling it, however, is to emphasise the process. Read between the lines and we see Christians alongside Donald and Sheila as a couple and as individuals, staying with them through a difficult process. Christian workers need some understanding of the different faiths that they meet in interfaith families so that they may listen effectively, act and speak appropriately.

#### **10. Creating non traditional families to meet current needs**

For cultural and economic reasons it is hard for widows and older orphans to have decent housing. A project is underway in Kenya to encourage Anglican churches to build one new house a year for a widow, her children and some orphaned children. In this way a new family is created that experiences the love of the Christian community in finding the resources – money, people, skills to build the house for them. The houses cost \$800 or £600. This project was originally the vision of one woman who believed that God was calling her to do this.

The reasons for forming families that are non traditional vary. In Nigeria, for instance, children's lives may be under threat. A twin may be killed for being a twin or a child could be killed because the mother has died. To address this problem, families in Nigeria are adopting children, giving them shelter and caring for them.

Teenagers who have become Christians in secondary schools may be thrown out of the family home. Christian families are integrating them into their own families and demonstrating God's love for them. The same is true for many young women whose marriages have been terminated or who have suffered abuse. They find a place to belong, a home that is safe.

#### **11. Working at national and international levels**

Every piece of legislation that becomes law has implications for families. At national and international levels Christians have opportunities to network, to be involved in the consultative process, to speak out, to protest peacefully when appropriate. There are encouraging reports of church leaders doing this, of working for more family friendly policy-making. They are being heard and politicians in some countries are seeking their advice.

Similarly, local churches are encouraging their members to keep informed and to be active in making views heard, e.g. *Make Poverty History* campaign which could enable many families around the world to experience greater justice.

#### ***In conclusion***

There are many stories that could be told. You may have some to add. The ones we give we hope will emphasise the need for the church to:

Nurture the families within

Relate as God's people in community

Engage all members and all ages in family ministry

Encourage household-to-household work

Plan 'wearing family spectacles' so that different ages and stages of the family life cycle are accounted for

Take opportunities for working with others, locally, nationally and in the public arena

Work relationally using gospel means to reach families with the Good News

Undergird activity with prayer and time for listening to God and responding to the guidance of his Spirit.

## 11. BOOKS

### **Family**

Bender, Ross. Christians in Families : Genesis & Exodus, Herald Press, 1982  
ISBN0-8361-3301-3

*This is a classic that is well worth reading. You may have to obtain it from a library or borrow a copy from a friend. The themes of covenant, commitment, and kingdom mission are explored and the book is divided into five sections as follows:*

- 1. the community of women and men – sex, gender identity and role*
- 2. the covenant of marriage – a critique of monogamy and alternative intimate lifestyles*
- 3. the community of family – nurture and leaving*
- 4. the family in transition – forms, functions, social change*
- 5. the mission of the family- living in the world, relationship training*

Bridger, Francis. Celebrating the Family. Grove Ethical Studies. Cambridge: Grove Books. 1995. ISBN: 1 85174 302 2

Butler, Paul. Reaching Families. London: Scripture Union, 1995. ISBN 0-86291-972-9

*This is a very helpful book, easy to read, yet profound and thought provoking. Divided into two sections the author explores theology and provides practical ideas that he has practised at home and in his professional life. His exploration of 'the Family God', 'God in Family' and 'God's Family People' provides excellent material for use in any culture. Many principles are identified that are trans-cultural. Paul suggests 'the Bible effectively urges us to work with families as they are in reality rather than as we might want them to be. He is now Bishop of Southampton, UK and was formerly an Evangelist with Scripture Union.*

Church of England Board of Responsibility. Something to Celebrate: valuing Families in Church and Society. London: Church House Publishing, 1995. ISBN 0-7151-6579-8

*This is a report for the Church of England – a 'Christian reflection on families'. Its uniqueness lies in the way the research was done. The report is the result of a listening process - mainly listening to the experiences of thousands of members of churches and those on the edge of churches. The response was tremendous. Grass-roots Christians talked about the way their families were or were not supported by the churches. They revealed that churches were not really supporting them through some difficult family struggles, that some were unmentionable. The report was honest and contains some pertinent lessons for churches that want to work with the realities of cohabitation, marriage and family life. Unfortunately, quick reactions and negative press reports meant that this report was not taken as seriously as it might have been. It is worth a read by those in UK and the Anglican Communion especially.*

Collins, Gary. Family Shock: keeping families strong in the midst of earthshaking change. Wheaton Il: Tyndale House, 1995.

Coltrane, Scott. Gender and Families. London: Pine Forge Press, ISBN 0-8039-9036-7

*This is the first book available written specifically for undergraduate students that uses images from popular culture and events from everyday lives to explore how families and gender are mutually produced and inseparably linked. Author, Scott Coltrane makes the teaching of gender accessible and compelling to a wide array of students. This volume is ideal for use in a gender course, or as a supplement in family, general sociology and social inequality class *Interfaith and Jewish-Gentile intermarriage**

Drane, John & Olive. Family Fortunes: faith-full caring for today's families. London: Darton, Longman & Todd. 2004 ISBN 0 232 52542 0

*This is a book packed full of questions and exploration. Described as, 'groundbreaking' the authors begin with today's families – their struggles and potential - and take the reader through a process of identifying creative ways of nurturing faith. Along the way they address issues such as how we use the Bible, parenting, nurturing faith, helping those in abusive relationships, and valuing the wisdom of older people. Olive and John live in Scotland and are known for their teaching and training work on families and spirituality in different contexts around the world. They are both adjunct professors at Fuller Seminary, California.*

King, Joan. Ed. Family and all that Stuff.. Guildford: NCEC – Biddles, 1998. ISBN 0719709334

*Christians tell stories that illustrate the impact on them of family experience in their birth families (some of which did not have Christians in them), their family life now and their faith journeys.*

Levy-Drucker, Jane. Lesbian and Gay Families speak Out. Perseus Publishing (Harper Collins) 1998. ISBN 0-7382-0466-8

*There is nothing like a story to aid understanding. This book takes 22 real-life gay and lesbian families with children in them and gives us the opportunity to listen to their stories, their experiences. There is a chapter on religion and spirituality in gay and lesbian families. It is a book that increases insight and understanding and helps us to see and meet loving people rather than consider them as an 'issue'.*

Moloney, Micheal . Teenagers – Sex and Love. 2000. ISBN 9966-21-488-7;

*There is a growing need to present our young people the facts about the proper use of sex and also the fact concerning its misuse so that they can make mature choices in freedom and with informed consciences. The author aims at educating the young reader, approaching the subject of life from a Christian perspective.*

Onyango–Ajis, Peter and Jane M Kuria (ed). Families: First School of Christian Life. Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, ISBN:9966-21-874-2

*This book is written in simple and direct language. It presents families from various African countries and how they live the Gospel message. It challenges and encourages and can be used as a tool to encourage sharing/discussion in families and small groups.*

Parker, Russ. Healing Wounded History: recognising peoples healing places. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004. ISBN 0232522510

*Well known in the UK for his pastoral work as Director of the Acorn Christian Foundation, Russ Parker introduces the reader to the role of strategic prayer which he calls 'representational confession' and shows how it makes reconciliation and renewal possible for families, communities, tribes and nations. There is a workbook to go alongside this book for individuals and groups that contains seven sessions.*

Pothen, Peter. Unpackaging the Family. Grove Ethical Studies No 87. Nottingham: Grove Books, 1992. ISBN: 1 85174 223 9

Reynolds, Jenny. Not in Front of the Children. One Plus One, 2001.

*This book is about conflict in families and how it affects children. Jenny took over two hundred research findings on the subject as a basis for her writing. The book increases the understanding of readers and with reflection will help them to work with greater sensitivity and appropriateness.*

Wachira, Rose N. Parents And Teenagers – Bridging the Gap. 1995. ISBN 9966-21-151-9

*If there is a good relationship between parents and their children, the mini-society, which is the family, will be good.*

## **Marriage and couple Relationships**

Dominian, Jack. The Capacity to Love. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985. ISBN 023251643X

*Any book written by Jack Dominian will be a 'good read'. This one is a classic, written by a leading psychologist who is also a Christian on a journey. He tackles the theme of relationships – with self, with God, with family, friends and society and argues that when things go wrong, suffering, anxiety and aggression distort our image of God and God's image in us. He suggests that 'the interface of psychology and Christianity can be used to find the path to wholeness.'*

Dominian, Jack. Let's Make Love: the meaning of sexual intercourse. London: Darton, Longman & Todd. 2004 ISBN 0232 52338 x

*Jack argues that instead of rejoicing in the experience of sex as portrayed in the Song of Songs Christians have taken flight and imprisoned it in the biology of procreation. Be prepared to have prejudices and perceptions changed.*

Dormer, Duncan. The Relationship Revolution. One Plus One, 1992

*This is a booklet (34 pages, A4) containing information about thirty European nations. Duncan looks at the radical changes that have occurred in couple relationships and asks 'Are women and men relationships experiencing a historic transition?' Ten years on this material gives a base from which to reflect on the current situation.*

Mackay, Hugh. "Marriage and the Family." Chap. in Turning Point. Sydney, Australia: Macmillan, 1999.

Schneid, Hayyim (compiler). Marriage. Popular Judaica Library. Jerusalem: Keteer Books. 1973. ISBN: 0 7065 1316 9

Thatcher, Adrian. Living Together & Christian Ethics. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

ISBN 0 521 00955 3

*This is an in-depth study of cohabitation outside marriage. It is positive and written from a mainstream Christian theological perspective. Adrian (Professor of Applied Theology, College of St Mark and St John, Plymouth, UK) retrieves some of the traditions of betrothal from the Bible and church history. He argues for changes in practice – pastoral, theological, liturgical – and challenges the church to reclaim forgotten Christian marital traditions and to use them in conveying the Good News about Jesus to women and men. This book challenges the reader to think, raises questions and envisions.*

\_\_\_\_\_. The 'Daily Telegraph' Guide to Christian Marriage. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002. ISBN 0826466 29X

*Adrian Thatcher is a prolific writer who has published many papers on marriage and family life. This book is for those who attend weddings or come to the church for marriage. They may not be regular church attenders. The book covers subjects such as the advantages of marriage, preparing for marriage, marriage as a vocation, pre-marriage inventories, breakdown and remarriage, degrees of commitment.*

## **Grandparenting**

King, Joan. Never Mind the Gap: a book for grandparents. National Christian Education Council, 1999. ISBN0-7197-0934-2

*Primarily for those from Christian traditions who are grandparents or prospective grandparents and those who are significant older people in children's lives. The book explores the ever-developing challenges that grandparenting brings. It is packed with information, opportunities for reflection and activity, advice and resources.*

## **Sexuality**

Dormer, Duncan. Just Cohabiting? The Church Sex and Getting Married. London: Darton, Longman & Todd. 2003 ISBN 0232 52484x

A short history of church attitudes to sexuality and marriage and an analysis of its failure to respond to the changes in sexual behaviour, gender roles and family life in Europe and USA over the past 40 years. The author is Dean of St John's College, Cambridge and lectures in Sociology of Religion.

House of Bishops. Some Issues in Human Sexuality. London: Church House Publishing, 2003 ISBN 0-7151-3868-5

*This book comes from a working group of the Church of England and is commended by the House of Bishops to assist in the process of study and reflection on three topics – homosexuality, bisexuality and transexualism. An account of the current debate is given and an extensive analysis of the key scriptural passages is undertaken. This book/report will be helpful to those wanting to reflect on the issues and to be involved in the ongoing debates in ways that handle issues with theological rigour while being pastorally sensitive.*

## **Journals**

### **Family**

World Council of Churches. The Journal of Marriage and Family. 5 copies per year

*Described as a leading research journal for over 60 years, it features original research and theory, research interpretation, reviews and critical discussion concerning marriage, other forms of close relationships and families. It is restricted to those who are members of the network and available through the library. For more information contact [bossey@wcc.coe.org](mailto:bossey@wcc.coe.org)*

## **Intermarriage Trends**

American Jewish Committee. Responding to Intermarriage: Survey, Analysis, Policy. New York: American Jewish Committee Department of Contemporary Jewish Life, 2001.

Fishman, Sylvia Barack. Double or Nothing? Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2004.

## **Organisations and Agencies**

### **Family**

Care for the Family, PO Box 488, Cardiff, CF1 1RE, UK.

[www.care-for-the-family.org.uk](http://www.care-for-the-family.org.uk) Tel in UK 029 2081 0800

Aims to promote strong family life and to help those hurting from family breakdown. Their purpose is to bring hope, compassion and practical down to earth help and encouragement to families and those who work with them. A wide range of resources are published on subjects such as parenting, the first five years of marriage, grand-parenting, work and family. A variety of projects are being researched at any one time. The organisation works at a number of levels, i.e. national/government, church leaders, married couples, parents and is well known for its encouraging face to face work, e.g. talks for parents, dads and boy weekends, dads and daughter weekends, mother and daughter weekends.

Churches Together for Families (in England and Wales) Tel 020 7898 1535 Fax 020 7898 1536

Email [Sue.Burridge@c-of-e.org.uk](mailto:Sue.Burridge@c-of-e.org.uk) [www.churchesandfamilies.org](http://www.churchesandfamilies.org)

*CTF is an umbrella organisation that brings together a unique blend of agencies, organisations and Christian churches (from new churches to Greek Orthodox The member churches and organisations work independently but share insights, learn from and with each other. CTF also has a life of its own and has done considerable work to enable churches to be more family friendly and to explore marriage preparation and support. The website gives access to*

worship materials using family themes, provides tools and links to other organisations, especially marriage preparation, useful publications and web sites.

*Note: links to marriage preparation resources include reviews and stories from user.*

International Anglican Family Network. IAFN Office, PO Box 54, Minehead, Somerset

TA24 7WD, UK. [www.iafn.net](http://www.iafn.net)

*IAFN brings together people from the Anglican Communion across the globe working with and for families. The network acts as a channel for information flow and keeps people in touch with what is happening to families in different parts of the world. Each issue of the newsletter takes a theme, e.g. travelling families, refugee families, parenting, health/food.*

Methodist Church of Great Britain. [www.methodist.org.uk](http://www.methodist.org.uk)

There are a number of working documents, papers and resources on family life that can be accessed through the website. Fact sheets are available on:

Abortion, Euthanasia, Homosexuality, Getting married in the Methodist Church  
Reports include: *Domestic Violence and the Methodist Church* (2002), *Marriage and the Methodist Church* (2002), *Church and sex offenders* (2000)

*For those who are in Christian churches that have not yet addressed these issues at denominational level the process undertaken in adopting these papers will be as useful as the content.*

Married or Not. <http://www.oneplusone.org.uk/marriedornot/index.htm>

*This new link is essential for those working with families that have a cohabiting couple in them and those who are separating. In the UK, 61% of cohabiting couples believe that living together gives them the same rights as married couples but it does not. Here, you will find an overview of the legal position and practical information about changing names, property, finance, children, separation, wills and inheritance, health and sickness. The information is useful to cohabiting couples and those who have a pastoral role in their lives.*

*Those outside the UK may find the information helpful in raising awareness of some of the questions that need to be asked – especially if similar information is not available for their own context.*

One plus One and Partnership Research. In UK Tel 0207841 3660, Fax 020 7841 3679

[www.oneplusone.org.uk](http://www.oneplusone.org.uk)

*Well known for the quality and rigour of its research One Plus One was founded by Jack Dominian in 1971. The current director, Penny Mansfield worked with Jack and has led this UK based charity since 1996. For the latest research findings about marriage, partnerships and best practice (action that works) see the web site that is regularly updated*

*Springboard is a membership scheme that can be joined online. Membership for individuals cost £25 sterling and for that you receive many 'goodies' including a digest of the latest research findings and access to publications that can be downloaded.*

Relate. <[Relate.org.uk](http://Relate.org.uk)>

*Relate publishes many resources, provides counselling and training for couples. The best thing to do is look at the website.*

The marriagecourse.org

*Alpha International is extending their work with couples and families. This address will give access to information including The Marriage Preparation Course.*

## **Intermarriage**

There are a number of websites through which people in interchurch, interfaith and cross-cultural families can be supported. We recommend that readers take a look to discover where they point families for support and expertise that they may not have. One such web site is:

Muslim Christian Marriage Support Group. [www.mcmarriage.org.uk](http://www.mcmarriage.org.uk)

*There are more people in Christian/Muslim marriages in the UK than is often imagined. This network is for those who find themselves in the situation. It is essentially supportive but also provides a safe environment for people to share their experiences both good and bad. The network encourages 'tolerance to explore' and includes people from a variety of backgrounds and affiliations across both faith traditions. Their work is under-girded by the principles of good will and courtesy towards the sensibilities of others and tolerance of different viewpoints. There are six monthly meetings in London and a newsletter is circulated more widely.*

Floreen, Harold. The Lutheran Parish and the Jews: an analytical study. Chicago: The National Lutheran Council Division of American Missions. 1948.

Fryling, Alice. An Unequal Yoke: in dating & marriage. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press. 1979.

Nikki Hevesy, prod. Joined Together: Discovering a Spiritual Basis for Unity in Your Interfaith Marriage. New York: Chosen People Ministries, 2003. 47 minutes.

Rudolph, David J. Growing Your Olive Tree Marriage: A guide for couples from two traditions. Baltimore: Lederer Books, 2003.

Rydelnik, Michael. "Reaching Intermarried Couples: A Marketing Plan For Messianic Congregation's" LCJE BULLETIN, 42, (November 1995), pp. 10-15.

Son of David Congregation. A messianic congregation of Jews and Gentiles that specializes in intermarriage ministry. Web site is «<http://www.sonofdavid.org>». Contact: Scott Brown, Congregational Leader. 620 Hungerford Drive, Ste. 11; Rockville, Maryland, USA, 20850. Phone: (301) 838 – 8612 and Email - [sonofdavid@cavtel.net](mailto:sonofdavid@cavtel.net)

Wan, Enoch and Zaretsky, Tuvya. Jewish-Gentile Couples: Trends, Challenges and Hopes. Pasadena: William Carey Library Publishers. 2004.

### *Traditional Jewish Response*

Hawxhurst, Joan C. Interfaith Family GuideBook: Practical Advice for Jewish and Christian Partners. Kalamazoo: Dovetail Publishing. 1998.

Petsonk, Judy and Jim Remsen. The Intermarriage Handbook: A Guide for Jews and Christians. New York: Quill William Morrow and Company, 1988.

## **Parenting resources and programmes**

Family Caring Trust, 8 Ashtree Enterprise Park, Newry, Co Down, BT34 1BY Northern Ireland. Tel 028 3026 4174 . [www.familycaring.co.uk](http://www.familycaring.co.uk)

*Founded by Michael and Terri Quin, FCT produces practical training resources for use with community groups. Their work comes from a community based perspective and is informed by their Christian beliefs. The resources have been used across the denominations in the UK and beyond and by community projects. Some of the materials have been translated into a number of languages, the latest being Thai. They concentrate on relationships and the learning of skills, especially those that will enable parents to relate with their children more effectively. There are optional sessions on spirituality which many non church parents opt to attend.*

*FCT is the only publisher of specifically age related parenting materials in the UK at present. Others focus on the early years or span the ages, perhaps having one session on each.*

Look out for

- *What can a parent do? Eight sessions for use with parents of children aged about 6-10*
- *Noughts to sixes parenting programme Sessions for use with parents of young children*
- *Teen parenting programme Sessions focussing particularly on dynamic teen/parent relationships.*
- *Young Adults course focuses on communication and relationship skills*
- *Parenting & Sex five sessions for parents including freeing children to love, talking about sex, positive sex education*

FCT also produces games to get families and a marriage listening programme  
Parenttalk, PO Box 23142, London, SE1 0ZT. Tel 0700 2000 500

*Founded by Steve Chalke, a Baptist minister and TV personality, Parent-talk is a UK based charity that aims to help and encourage parents. Parent-talk is a Parenting Principles Course comprising eight flexible video-based sessions. The course materials can be supplemented by a range of publications that are available in major supermarkets and are published by Hodder & Stoughton.*

*The Childhood Years*

*Being a Mum*

*Being a Dad*

*Great Days Out*

Positive Parenting, 2a South Street, Gosport, PO12 1ES. Tel 023 0252 8787, Fax 023 9250 1111. [www.positiveparenting.info](http://www.positiveparenting.info)

*The roots of this organisation lie in the pastoral/community development work of a local church. It has grown into a nationally recognised UK charity that researches and develops resources to support parents, usually in small groups. PP aims to increase the confidence of parents and to help them in their relationships with children, boosting emotional security and providing positive discipline. Courses include:*

*Time Out for Parents: Ten sessions including what children need from parents, setting loving limits, teen zone, home alone, food and fitness.*

*Time Out for Dads: Five sessions for Dads including one on step-fathering*

*A range of further publications, including useful leaflets and articles are available.*

Holford, Karen. The Family Book: creative ideas for families. Grantham, UK: Stanborough, 2004. ISBN 1-899505-93-8

*A colourful book packed full of common sense and creative ideas.*

## AFTERWORD

We end this paper as we began. On a journey that will continue. We hope that you have gained some insights from 'our work in progress' and will share them with others.

As the working group ended its time in Thailand the following actions points were identified

1. More work to be done to develop theologies of family and church including reaching non traditional in Christ-like ways
2. Churches to be encouraged and helped develop their own family relationships and 'faithing' processes
3. Training in relational and attitudinal skills to be made available to Christians to enable them to reach families with the Good News in incarnational ways

We learned that as Christian workers who reach out to families we must be continually be mindful of our own families and ask:

How is my family?

And so we end by asking:

**How is your family?**

## PARTICIPANTS

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