

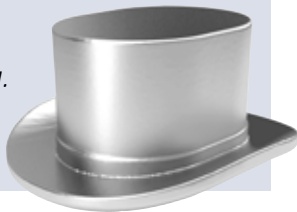
Theology & Society

Issue 2

Transforming Lives: Transforming Congregations: Transforming Communities

Theology & Society is put together by the Social Responsibility Group. Many thanks to Sue Burrige, Church of England Policy Adviser for Marriage and the Family, for the bulk of the content in this issue and also Maureen, Richard, Rob and Saleem from our own diocese for sharing their stories.

Our next issue, which will be published in the spring of 2010, will be looking at the controversial subject of assisted dying.



Family Life Today

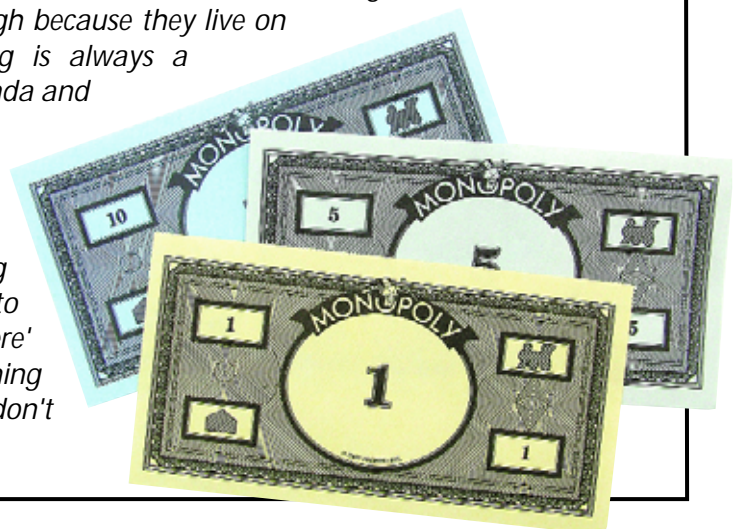
The word family is a very emotive word and one that has caused huge debate in society. Often there is a discrepancy between what we feel the family should look like and what family lives actually look like, but it is important that we have a realistic view of families, particularly as we work out our role in supporting people through God's love. In this addition of Theology and Society we are going to reflect on the changes of family life today, illustrating these changes with real life stories from families within our diocese.

Families in the 2000s are characterised by diversity, continuity and change. The majority of families with children are headed by a couple but there is increasingly a diversity of living arrangements for partnering and parenting.

Maureen's Story

Maureen is 57 years old. She was divorced about 30 years ago after a traumatic and violent marriage. She brought up her 4 children alone. Two are now married and one died recently (aged 37). One daughter Brenda (a single parent, aged 40) and her 2

year old child (William) now live with Maureen. Brenda has health problems and Maureen is her nominated 24 hour carer; William also has health issues, but despite this they are fiercely independent. They have a strong sense of being a family and having been 'let down' by men in the past they have no intention of letting any more of them into their lives. Maureen has lots of regrets about the past, but she adores her family and wouldn't have it any other way. She has no dreams about them becoming a more conventional family unit - they are very happy as they are, although because they live on benefits finding the rent and paying for shopping is always a challenge. Maureen feels a great responsibility for Brenda and William but at 57 she says she is really too old to be bringing up a small child and gets exhausted. Although William was an unexpected addition to the family they wouldn't be without him. They like living together and get on very well. They also enjoy feeling part of their church family. When they first went to church they thought 'what on earth are we doing here' but it was a really good move for them - the right thing at the right time - people are very supportive and don't judge them for being 'different'.



For the most part average family sizes are decreasing because first time mothers are increasingly older and having fewer children. This means we have proportionally fewer children in our population today, dropping from roughly 1 in 3 in the 1950s to 1 in 6 today. We see this reflected in our communities - so that the number of households with only one person in them is about the same as those that contain a dependant child. As the 'baby boomer generation' hits retirement age, we are starting to see in the older age-groups those folk who spearheaded the changing patterns of family life which are now common amongst the general population - and one of the most noticeable features will be the increasing prevalence of single older people. Although men are catching up with women in the longevity stakes, so that widowhood might become a less common feature amongst older women, more people are starting to arrive in the retirement bracket with a variety of family experiences behind them. The late-20th century's increasing incidence of divorce, single parenthood, blended families, cohabittees, singles, and gay and lesbian individuals (who may or may not have lived openly in relationships) means that the mixture of older people in the community will reflect a far richer blend of experiences than the traditional nuclear family. And as family size has on the whole been shrinking, with a trend towards moving away from your roots, even older people with children and grandchildren may find themselves alone in their communities. So how do today's older people in these situations find the emphasis on 'family life'?

Richard's Story

Richard is single, and a retired Local Government Officer. He is active in the life of his local church in Halifax and in other voluntary activities.

"I started coming to church about 5 years ago. I needed to expand my social life following a bereavement. I had dabbled in Christianity at various times during my life, and I had always enjoyed watching 'Songs of Praise' on television! Although I am single, I have not felt excluded from church life in any way. I was appointed as a sidesperson within a few months of joining the church. I also undertook welcoming duties within the church, and for a few years, was a member of the walking group. I have very much enjoyed my time with the church, and striking up a friendship with a widowed lady who joined the congregation shortly after me has improved my social life."



The shape of families is changing too with the numbers of children living in single-parent households and step-families increasing and the marriage rate consistently falling since the 1970s. The changes in family structure have had an effect on the income families have to live on. Whereas in the 1950s the proportion of children was roughly the same across all income groups, the 2001 census showed that today children are more likely to be found in the poorer households. In 2006, nearly 1 in 5 children were born into households where no adult was employed.

In 2007 1 in 4 children were born into families where one or both of the parents were born outside the UK and the size of these families is much higher than the overall average. Children born into ethnic communities were more likely to suffer from economic disadvantage.

The Children's Society 'Good Childhood Inquiry' found that children spend more time doing things together with their parents (particularly if you include TV) than in 1970. Most young people feel loved and cared for in their families - only 1 in 15 said their parents made them feel bad about themselves - and most young people feel they can talk to their parents about any problem they might have. But we tend now to talk about the family in terms of crisis and because families are seen as key to the wellbeing

of society, reform of the family is frequently seen as a way of causing social reform. In practice, those who suffer the effects of social change or disruption the most are sometimes held responsible for these effects - women blamed for the rise in divorce, parents for disorderly children, and so forth, whatever the complex causes - and the family becomes the object of legislation with the aim of achieving social reform of perceived ills. We can all think of examples of this in recent years.

But let's look a bit closer to home: why do changes in families worry us personally? Augustine argued that family creates or damages us because the family is the site of our deepest longings and fears. If we had good experiences of family relationships then it equips us well to cope with the world. If experience within the family has not been good then we feel we are less well equipped. This does not deny that people from very difficult backgrounds have made very significant contributions to society, art and science but we tend to feel it is against huge odds. This is why we worry about the future of families.

As Christian leaders we need to be mindful of the issues people are raising about family life and the ways in which the church is responding. Perhaps we too need to be asking ourselves and others a range of questions about our understanding of "family".

Rob's Story

Rob is a single parent with three sons - Luke, Daniel and Jamie. They live in North Halifax where the lads attend a local primary school while their dad adjusts to spending his time at home, having previously worked for much of his adult life. The boys still have contact with their mother, but it is Rob who now cares for them and their home on a day-to-day basis. He works hard to ensure that the boys are well looked after and in good health and he hopes that their lifestyle will improve in the future as circumstances change, hopefully, for the better. Rob hopes they'll go to college and get a better education and decent jobs.

The family attend the local Dads R Us group, run by SureStart. Rob and the boys enjoy meeting with the other dads and their children, having much-needed quality time together. "This gives me the opportunity", Rob says, "to meet with other dads and for the boys to grow more independent as they relate to and play with the other children. It gives me chance to meet with others in the same situation as me."

The group meets once a month (on a Saturday morning) at various venues around the locality, including Holy Nativity Church in Mixenden. They meet for breakfast and share various activities, learning and having fun together. There are occasional trips to the seaside, museums, parks and leisure centres where the children can spend quality time with their dads, as well as the dads being able to share their experiences and support each other. The group has been extremely successful - almost every time they meet, new dads arrive.



Rob has ambitions. He wants to come off the dole, pay off his debts and live comfortably. His immediate priorities are coping with the day-to-day routine of running a home with three young boys, getting used to being at home and being the best dad and parent he can be. "The best thing, for me," Rob tells me, "is receiving love from the kids."



Saleem's Story

Saleem was born in Pakistan and came to England in 1977 to marry his wife, Nusrat. They live in a 4 bedroomed house in Birkby with their extended family - 2 daughters, one son and his wife and two children (including a 7 week old baby). One of his daughters is married but her husband is in Pakistan. When he is eventually able to come to England he too will live with the family. Saleem is one of 5 brothers and Saleem estimates that there are approximately 75 members of his extended family living locally. Family support is very important in Saleem's culture and everyone helps to care for the children. Boys are expected to support their parents. Saleem's father was a priest and had a very low stipend, so once Saleem was established in England he was able to support his parents financially. He still supports his brothers in Pakistan when he is able to and he supports his own children until they are able to buy their own house - eventually it is expected that they will support him and Nusrat.

The important thing is that Saleem feels his family are safe here. As Christians in an Islamic country they would be in the minority, they would be persecuted and not protected by the law. In England they are an ethnic minority but they are protected by the law; Saleem says that Birkby is a good place to live - it is very multi-cultural but all the different religions live side by side and all get on with each other. The family and many of their relatives worship together at St Cuthbert's. The real challenge for the family are the cultural differences between his generation who were born in Pakistan and his English born children and grandchildren's generation. A key area is marriage. Saleem says that it is his duty and responsibility to advise his children to make a good marriage - he wants them to marry within their own culture, but he says in the end race or colour is not the issue; the important thing is that they find Christian partners. If they cannot find a partner in England then he arranges for them to go to Pakistan.



The family is changing

- to what extent are we responding?

- How important to you is your extended family? Do you struggle to maintain a proper relationship with some of your close relations due to time and distance? Who are the significant others in your life? Do you have friends who are more like family to you because you see more of them? Are these the ones you would turn to in a time of need?
- How are our churches reflecting changes within family life in our society? Are we still hanging on to outdated ideas where we expect everyone to be in the classic nuclear family?
- Does our liturgy relate to developments in family structures? Is Mothering Sunday the only Sunday when we focus directly on a specific role within families? How could we improve on this?
- What can churches offer at Christmas in relation to these issues? Could the story of the family at the centre of the nativity story help us here?
- Did Jesus rate the family? What are we to do with his teaching on divorce?
- How is the rise of social networking affecting young people's perceptions of the family? Is this a discussion worth having with the young people in your church?



Youthful energy to Old FLAME!

During the summer, Lisa Senior, the Family Life and Marriage Education Officer in the diocese was ordained deacon. We thank Lisa, for all that she has given to the diocese in her role and wish her every blessing in her continuing ministry.

Lisa's post is not being refilled, but the work which FLAME has done with families, parenting, marriage and baptism is being picked up by the diocesan Children and Youth Team. Richard Burge, Liz Morton, Ellie Wilson and Ann Hall have worked closely with Lisa and the two areas fit well together.

"We will not be able to do everything, but we will continue to support parishes in these areas." said Richard Burge, Children and Youth Team co-ordinator. "Children, Young People and Families are very important to the life of the Church." The team would like to draw two dates in particular to your attention:

Saturday 19 December 2009 at Cannon Hall, Barnsley 11am to 3pm.

Christmas activities for all ages. An opportunity for families to explore together the wonder of the Christmas message.

Saturday 30 January 2010 at St Thomas', Bradley

A day exploring baptism. Looking at preparation, the service itself and baptism follow-up, family spirituality and the use of the font, this will be a day to explore every aspect of baptism.

For more details of these events please contact the Children and Youth Team at Church House on 01924 371802 or visit their webpage at: wakefield.anglican.org/childrenandyouth

If you are interested in following up any of the other points in this issue of Theology & Society with the Social Responsibility Group, please get in touch with Maureen Browell on 01484 545085 or by email at maureenbrowell@talktalk.net