

## WORKING FOR FAMILIES?

### Summary of main points

The typical New Zealand household has changed dramatically in recent decades. Currently only 31 percent of New Zealand adults live in a traditional nuclear family (mum, dad and kids).

Changing demographics are a major factor. We are having fewer children and living longer than previous generations. Couples living without children have replaced the 'traditional' family. 29 percent of New Zealand families with children are now solo-parented.

Our declining birth-rate and increasingly aging population challenges us with some difficult economic questions – particularly in relation to pension provision and its funding.

The marriage rate is declining. There are many reasons for this: a general trend towards delayed marriage; more people wishing to remain single; the continuing growth of *de facto* relationships.

Research suggests that marriage provides greater family stability than *de facto* relationships. Many more *de facto* relationships dissolve than marriages. Many Christians felt that the Civil Union Act in 2005 would sound the death-knell of marriage.

The current situation presents Christians and churches with an opportunity to think afresh about the nature of relationships. The Bible offers many different images of 'marriage', suggesting there may be merit in trying to understand better the diverse nature of relationships today. There is value in moving beyond an understanding of marriage as always morally good and *de facto* relationships as always morally bad, toward a focus on the character rather than legal status of relationships.

*De facto* relationships fall into three broad categories: co-habiting out of convenience; having a long-term commitment but avoiding or delaying marriage for various reasons; having a commitment but viewing marriage as outdated, unnecessary, or (in the case of same-sex couples) not an option. A key distinction between marriage and *de facto* relationships is the public nature of the commitment as expressed in the wedding ceremony.

There is value for Christians with a European background in recognizing other cultural ways of being family/whānau. In contrast to traditional models, shared care-giving of children is becoming more routine and there are increasing numbers of males performing the role of primary care-giver.

New Zealand families face many challenges: (i) *economic*: when both parents are in paid work, for reasons of economic necessity or to provide a better standard of living for the family, there are issues for children; (ii) *violence within families* is increasing, raising questions about the effect it may be having on children caught up in it; (iii) *changing attitudes towards sexuality* - New Zealand has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the world, and more teenage women are opting for abortion rather than parenthood. Abortion rates generally have increased in recent years. Some Christian voices have called for campaigns against promiscuity and abstinence programmes. The media play a role in shaping attitudes to sexuality, particularly among the young.

The question of 'family values' does not exist in isolation from other issues: all policies adopted by governments – economic, social, educational, environmental – have consequences for the family unit, an important thing to bear in mind at election time.

## Questions to consider

1. What constitutes a 'healthy family'?
2. What does it mean to advocate for 'family values'?
3. Are you worried that the 'typical New Zealand household' has changed so radically in recent years?
4. How can we, as a society, best care for those who are now enjoying their well-earned retirement?
5. Are you concerned at the large number of children now growing up in solo-parented homes?
6. Should anything be done to try to halt the decline in the popularity of marriage? If so, what?
7. Can the church's understanding of family and marriage be imposed upon society?
8. Do you think there is merit in moving toward a focus on the character rather than legal status of relationships?
9. Does the advent of both parents working full-time pose a threat to, or increase the quality of, family life?
10. How can churches help families to stay together and add to their quality of life together?
11. Should 'home-making' be valued as much as paid work?
12. Do you think that policies aimed at reducing economic inequality would be beneficial to families?
13. Are there social and environmental policies that governments could adopt that would encourage and support more stable and cohesive family life?
14. Have Christians bought into the 'keeping up with the Jones' culture at the expense of the quality of family relationships? How different are your economic aspirations and desires from those of your neighbours who don't share your faith?
15. Can anything be done about rising levels of family violence and, if so, what? What do you think of the suggestion of introducing conflict transformation and non-violent communication into the education curriculum? Do you think this would assist in creating a new culture of non-violence?
16. Are you concerned about the rising abortion rate in New Zealand, particularly among young women? What do you think can be done to reverse it? Do churches have a role in this?
17. Would you support a campaign against promiscuity, or in favour of abstinence? What other ideas do you have to tackle the increasing trend to cheapen sex? Is cultural change in this area possible?
18. Do you think the media have a responsibility in this area? What rules do you apply in your household with respect to watching TV, accessing the Internet and so on?
19. What is the balance between individual liberty and the protection of others?
20. Can the model of Christians being one family joined in Christ provide a realistic analogy for contemporary society?