

WORKING FOR FAMILIES?

Nothing, it seems, gets Christians as fired up and engaged in the arena of politics as issues involving familial relationships. Whether it's the Homosexual Law Reform Act 1986 (which decriminalised consensual sex between men aged 16 and over); the Civil Union Act 2004 (which established the institution of civil union); or the Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act 2007 (which removed the legal defence of 'reasonable force' for parents prosecuted for assault on their children), on each occasion Christians have been conspicuously vocal about their views. While a divergence of perspectives exists among Christians, for many these pieces of legislation were construed as serious threats to the institutions of marriage and family, and many responded by petitioning, marching and protesting to defend the rights and role of families.

There would be widespread agreement with the statement that the health of families is integral to the well-being of a society, and that the family unit is the foundation upon which a society is based, the substance that holds society together. However, this raises a number of interesting questions worth exploring. What is it that constitutes a 'healthy' family? What does it mean to advocate for 'family values'? Are some political parties inherently more 'family friendly' than others? How do we really put the 'family first'? Far from having universal agreement, such questions, as with all questions regarding 'values', are open to debate and different perspectives. To enter into the debate necessitates firstly some discussion over what actually constitutes a 'family'. So, what does the average New Zealand family look like?

The typical New Zealand household?

The typical New Zealand household – and perhaps also the ideal household unit – is often portrayed as a nuclear family with Mum and Dad and two or three kids. However, this portrayal is quite different from reality. Currently only 31 per cent of New Zealand adults over the age of eighteen live in a traditional nuclear family (partnered male and female with kids), and this figure is expected to drop to just 23 per cent by 2031. Why this change? Quite simply, the changing nature of New Zealand families in large part reflects changing demographics.

As with other Western countries, greater affluence since the Second World War has led to significant changes in New Zealand society. Higher standards of living have meant a lowering of infant mortality rates and New Zealanders are having fewer

children and also living longer than in previous generations. Those having children are doing so later (in the early 1970s the median age of mothers giving birth was 25; today it is 30), and many New Zealand couples are choosing not to have children at all – preferring higher incomes and a greater freedom from what they perceive as the economic and lifestyle restraints that come with parental responsibility.¹ Accordingly, *childless couples* (couples who have never had children and those whose children are now living independently) have replaced the ‘traditional’ family of Mum, Dad and kids, as New Zealand’s most common kind of household. Currently 30 per cent of New Zealand adults are in these childless households, and this is expected to rise to 36 per cent of adults in the coming decade. At the same time, New Zealand adults living alone, or with flat-mates, or in other non-family households, are projected to rise from 20 per cent to 23 per cent over the same period.

New Zealand’s declining birth rate² and aging population has important implications for our society. As the ‘baby-boomer’ generation reaches retirement age we face some difficult economic questions. While the country has had some form of state-funded retirement income for over one hundred years, is a universal government pension economically sustainable in the long-term? Does the age of qualification to receive the New Zealand pension need to be lifted higher in recognition of longer life expectancy? Should the government pension be means-tested, or should there be the introduction of a compulsory superannuation scheme? Should political parties be pressured to reach a common accord on superannuation? How do we as a society best care (economically and socially) for older people, particularly those without younger family members in close proximity?

The Changing Composition of NZ families

While the ‘childless couple’ is now the most common form of New Zealand household, even the nature of households with children has steadily changed during the last thirty years. While something of a social stigma in the past, 29 per cent of New Zealand families with children are now solo-parented, up from 10 per cent in 1976. Solo parents now comprise 7 per cent of New Zealand’s total population and

¹ The greater affluence of our society has given rise to a whole new social phenomenon – ‘dinkies’ (double income no kids); see Simon Collins, ‘Mum, Dad and kids no longer typical household’, *New Zealand Herald*, 20 July 2010, <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10659951>.

² Though diminishing, New Zealand’s birth rate of 2.1 children per woman is still higher than many other developed countries, and this natural increase (births minus deaths) is sufficient to keep the New Zealand population growing by approximately 30,000 each year.

this figure is projected to rise, with close to a third of New Zealand children expected to be solo-parented in the coming years.

The higher number of solo-parents in New Zealand is indicative of the changing perceptions and behaviour towards marriage within New Zealand society. While historically marriage has been an important social institution within New Zealand, the number of marriages has steadily dropped during the last forty years. The highest number of marriages in any year was in 1971, when 27,200 couples tied the knot (a marriage rate of 45.5 per 1000 non-married people over the age of 16) but in 2010 only there were only 20,900 marriages (12.5 per 1000) registered to New Zealand residents.

Marriage and *de facto* Relationship

Why this decline in the marriage rate? There are many contributing factors. Obviously New Zealand's aging population is part of the explanation (the high point for marriages occurred when post-war 'baby-boomers' were marrying in the early 1970s); there is a general trend towards delayed marriage (New Zealand men and women are now marrying, on average, nine years later than in 1971); and increasing numbers of New Zealanders are remaining single. However, alongside these factors there is also the continuing growth of *de facto* relationships. While forty years ago unmarried couples 'living together' would have been subject to accusations of 'living in sin', such relationships are now commonplace. In 1996, about 1 in 7 adults (aged 15 years and over) who were in partnerships were not legally married, but by 2006, this figure had increased to around 1 in 5.³

A Christian Response?

Clearly, the changing demographics of New Zealand families raise a number of questions. Should we be concerned at the large number of children growing up in solo-parent homes? Should the increasing numbers of people who prefer *de facto* relationships over traditional marriage be a cause for concern? Is the declining marriage rate a problem? Is there any major difference between *de facto* partnerships and marriages with regard to the stability of such relationships? Is one form of relationship more 'healthy' for children than the other?

Such questions touch on highly sensitive issues, and discussing them is made more difficult by the lack of hard data available. Nevertheless, there is research

³ The fact that higher numbers are either choosing *de facto* relationships instead of, or prior to, entering into marriage, is not a phenomenon unique to New Zealand. Other Western countries, shaped by the Judeo-Christian tradition, are also experiencing declining marriage rates.

beginning to emerge supporting the claim that marriage *does* provide greater family stability. A 2006 British report, released perhaps surprisingly by an influential left-leaning policy group, the Institute for Public Policy Research, concluded that the rising rate of pregnancies, drug and alcohol consumption, mental health problems and violence amongst teenagers could be attributed to the breakdown of traditional families. The report stated that

research shows that changes in families, such as more parents working, and rising rates of divorce and single parenthood, have undermined the ability of families to effectively socialise young people.⁴

Recent studies from many Western countries, including New Zealand, show an alarming association between absent fathers and teenage pregnancy rates and male violence – themes we will return to later in this chapter.⁵ Elsewhere, in a report released in 2011, the Jubilee Centre, a British Christian think-tank compared the difference between those couples co-habiting at the birth of their first child and those who are married. In their survey, 37 per cent of cohabiting couples had separated by the time the child had turned five, compared to 6 per cent of married couples. By the time a child had turned 16, 66 per cent of co-habiting couples had separated compared to 16 per cent of married couples.⁶

So, what is the appropriate response of the church to the decline of marriage and the growing rates of *de facto* relationships and solo-parent families? The passing of the Civil Union Act in 2005 was met by alarm by many Christians, who believed that this legislation would sound the death-knell for the institution of marriage.⁷ Such anxiety led Brian Tamaki to organise an ‘Enough is Enough’ rally, in which 5,000 Destiny Church members dressed in black marched on Parliament – though, while expressing their passionate opposition to the proposed legislation, it is questionable whether such action was the most appropriate way of engaging with the issue.

⁴ Institute for Public Policy Research, ‘Freedoms Orphans: Raising Youth in a Changing World’, (Nov 2006), p.ix.

⁵ See Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, (Allen Lane: London, 2009), especially chs. 9 & 10.

⁶ Jubilee Centre, ‘Cohabitation: An Alternative to Marriage?’, (June 2011), <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/uploaded/files/resource_417.pdf> (26 July 2011).

⁷ In fact, concern that the Civil Union Act would lead to the further decline of marriages has not been borne out by statistics. Between 26 April 2005 (when the Act became law) and 2010, only 273 civil unions were registered to New Zealand residents – 200 same-sex unions (73 male and 127 female) and 73 opposite-sex unions. In addition, 65 civil unions were registered to overseas residents, bringing the total number of registrations to 338.

Is the promotion of marriage and protest against the establishment of other civil institutions the only, or the best, response available? Will such protests and the praise of marriage actually halt the gradual decline of marriage observed over the last thirty years? How could the church respond to some of the challenges faced by modern families in ways which avoid being seen by the public as patronising and moralising? What actions could the church take which would genuinely lead to the betterment of family lives? Should the church seek to encourage change through legislation?

The current David Cameron-led coalition government in the UK has openly spoken about being pro-family and pro-marriage. But how does being pro-family and pro-marriage actually work itself out in social, economic, educational and environmental policies? Would the adoption of some sort of Family Code – as attempted with the Code of Social Responsibility by the coalition Government in New Zealand led by Prime Minister Jenny Shipley in 1998 – help solve problems associated with family breakdown? Critics of such an approach in the late 1990's argued that the Government's stated intention for families to take more responsibility for themselves simply ignored and absolved the State from dealing with the underlying causes of family breakdown, often exacerbated by flawed economic and social policies.

Further, can the church's understanding of family and marriage be imposed upon broader society by legislation? While Christians have a right and a responsibility to express our opinion and perspectives in the public square, should we expect others to agree? One must also appreciate that even within the Christian community there is a divergence of opinions with regard both to marriage and same-sex relationships. Does support for *de facto* and civil-union relationships necessarily preclude one from continuing to uphold the sanctity of marriage? And, are Christians perhaps overly concerned about what takes place in the privacy of bedrooms?

The Merits of Marriage

One possible starting point in responding to these complex questions over the composition of families would be for the Church to take a more honest and nuanced view of relationships. Firstly, Christians would do well to recognise the somewhat chequered background of many biblical families. Most of the marriages and the family relationships of the Patriarchs would, by our standards, seem more than a little dysfunctional. Particularly striking is the genealogy of Jesus offered in Matthew's gospel, which in a break from custom, includes five women. These five women (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary) are hardly models for modern

‘family values’.⁸ Likewise, Jesus’ ministry, and his habit of attracting less-than-virtuous women, continues this scandal. Such women receive grace, forgiveness, and one particular woman receives a new vocation, becoming the first missionary to the half-caste despised Samaritans.⁹ Indeed, far from emphasising ‘family values’, it could be argued that the New Testament both relativises, while extending, our conception of family.¹⁰ Ultimately, the Bible offers vivid portrayals of ‘real families’ and draws attention to the way in which God works his salvific purposes, bringing blessing and wholeness to these broken families and through them to the societies and communities of which they are part.

As well as recognising the varied nature of biblical families, the church would also benefit from appreciating this same diversity in contemporary relationships. Instead of creating a simplistic distinction between marriage – which is perceived as morally good – and *de facto* relationships – which are viewed as morally inferior, would we not do well to recognise that not all marriages exhibit kingdom values and that not all *de facto* relationships are the same?

Broadly speaking it could be argued that *de facto* relationships fall into three categories:

1. With the social stigma of ‘living-together’ prior to marriage now fading, many cohabiting relationships now exist simply out of convenience. Dating partners choose to move in together both for convenience and sometimes for economic reasons. Changing cultural attitudes not only make ‘moving-in together’ easier, but the reduced stigma around the issues of separation and divorce also now make it easier to end such relationships. Thus, while cohabitation might once have been seen as a prelude to marriage, one could characterise the attitude of those in this category as one of ‘seeing how it goes.’
2. A second category consists of those involved in longer-term *de facto* partnerships who have moved past the ‘see how it goes’ stage and who recognise some sense of longer-term commitment to the relationship. Within

⁸ Tamar, in her desire to continue her deceased husband’s lineage, dresses up as a prostitute to seduce her father-in-law Judah (Gen. 38); Rahab, a prostitute and brothel owner, hides the spies of Israel in Jericho (Josh. 2); Ruth was a Moabitess who abandons her extended family to follow her mother-in-law Naomi back to Israel; Bathsheba is forced to commit adultery with King David while her husband is away fighting for the nation (2 Sam. 11); while Mary, is (technically!) a solo (and probably teenage) mother to Jesus.

⁹ See, for instance Luke 7:36-8:3, and John 4.

¹⁰ See Matt. 12:46-50, Mark 3:31-35.

such relationships there may even be some discussion of ‘marriage’ but busyness, concerns over the ‘religious’ nature of marriage, or the actual costs involved in a wedding, may delay marriage interminably.

3. A further category, it could be argued, view marriage as an out-dated concept, an unnecessary technicality, or in the case of same-sex couples, an option unavailable to them. Many of these couples live in long-term faithful relationships and understandably view their relationship as having legitimacy in its own right.

Quality of relationships

In recognising that many *de facto* relationships (including same-sex relationships) are long-term, committed, monogamous relationships displaying fidelity, love and mutual support, and in honestly confronting the fact that many marriages are unhealthy both for the partners and children, might the church be better focusing on the *existing character* rather than *legal status* of relationships? Such an approach, far from detracting from the advocacy for marriage, may provide the basis for the church to articulate more clearly its theology of marriage. The church can highlight and promote the virtues of love, loyalty, patience and kindness that exist within all committed monogamous relationships, while also explicitly pointing to distinguishing features of marriage.

It could be argued that one of the key distinctions between marriage and *de facto* relationships is the ‘public’ (and therefore political) nature of the commitment. In a wedding ceremony, the surrounding community of family and friends promise to uphold and support the relationship, and there is a public declaration of the couple’s need of God’s love, grace and forgiveness to enable them to practise love, and extend grace and forgiveness to one another. It is the public character of marriage – the recognition that healthy marriages depend both on the grace and support of the whole community and of the divine – which arguably distinguishes marriage from many *de facto* relationships. In the latter, the lack of public clarity over the nature and state of the relationship can lead to confusion as to the levels of commitment, and therefore can make support by both family and friends difficult.

This Christian understanding of the public nature of relationships – the fact that the health of a marriage depends on the support of the broader community – is not one that is always evident in much of the rhetoric on ‘family values’, which often seems to equate ‘family’ with a Pakeha middle-class nuclear-family way of doing things. Yet, what of other cultural and religious ways of being family/whānau?

What might New Zealand society and the church in Aotearoa learn from different cultural traditions of family, marriage and parenting? The well-known saying, ‘If you show me a mother, I’ll show you her child’, is based on a traditional Western concept of family, in which the woman will be the primary care-giver of children. However, today there are an increasing number of families where the mother may be working while the father is the primary care-giver at home. Similarly, in Polynesian and Māori contexts it is often older siblings and extended whānau (grandparents, uncles and aunts) who may take the greatest responsibility for care of children. In these contexts the more appropriate saying is, ‘You show me the village and I’ll show you the child’.

Already churches and Christian based organisation such as *Parents Inc.* and *Alpha* run a broad range of courses and workshops which promote kingdom values of love, mutual support, and faithfulness, and also assist in the development of important relational skills such as effective communication, personal awareness, compromise and so on. They are to be commended for this work, but will the offering of courses and the promotion of the merits of monogamous relationships alone assist the current state of New Zealand families?

Ultimately, there are multiple factors that contribute to the toxicity of relationships and eventually broken families. Far from having a single solution, any response to the crisis of New Zealand families will be multi-faceted.¹¹ In the rest of this chapter we will look at three particular challenges that face contemporary New Zealand families: economic challenges, the rise of family violence, and changing attitudes towards sexuality.

‘Families for Work’ – The Economic Challenge

While commentators often lament the decline of ‘family values’ within New Zealand during the last quarter of a century, it is worth pondering which values have replaced that of the family. While certainly there has been a cultural shift away from Judeo-Christian morality, how has our changing attitude to the market – often stimulated by the economic and social policies of successive governments – contributed to the changing nature and breakdown of the family unit? Could it be that, in the push for economic growth and efficiencies, the values of the market have contributed to the deterioration of the family unit?

¹¹ This can be a ‘chicken and egg’ scenario: failed relationships and broken families can lead to a raft of personal and social problems such as violence, economic hardship, teenage pregnancy, alcoholism and mental health issues, but these issues are also often the contributing factors that destroy relationships and families.

Historically, New Zealand families consisted of one sole bread-winner, while the other parent (usually the mother) stayed home as primary care-giver for children. But during the last quarter of a century there has been an enormous change. The revolution in attitudes to gender roles, a product of the success of the feminist movement in the 1960s, has led women to seek to combine successful careers with the responsibilities of children and family. For many New Zealand families there is the desire and expectation to live in houses in which children have their own personal bedrooms equipped with the latest computer and television technology, that children will attend the best schools and have the options of multiple extra-curricular activities, and that the family lifestyle will involve annual holidays (either overseas or to the ski-fields). Such expectations, and the social peer pressure of ‘keeping up with the Joneses’, have now made two parental incomes a necessity for many.¹² But are such families really happier and more secure? Are families in which both parents work 60+ hours a week, with children often under the supervision of carers, with peers, or left to their own devices, really an example of ideal families? Does the myriad of opportunities and luxuries offered to children from such affluent circumstances replace the need and desire of children for parental involvement and personal interest?

At the other end of the socio-economic spectrum are families in which both parents must work (and often in multiple jobs) simply to ensure that bills are paid and the family is fed. Can we really expect unskilled workers, earning close to the minimum wage of \$13.00 per hour, to provide the economic means for a family? Working multiple jobs may ensure school fees, medical bills, rent, power, transport and the always increasing food costs are barely met, but is this really the genuine family life? Inevitably, at either end of the spectrum, children bear the brunt of economic realities and desires. Newspapers regularly recount the consequences of this ‘home-alone’ syndrome – affluent children from well-to-do suburbs engaged in under-age drinking or drug abuse, or those from less well of suburbs who have found their sense of belonging and identity from gang membership.

A Christian response?

¹² One simple indicator of the increasing affluence of New Zealand society is the increasing size of our houses. Up until the decade of the 1980s the average New Zealand house size stayed relatively stable (130-140 square metres) – the exception to this being the smaller houses (113-118m²) built during World War Two and immediate post-war years. However, since the 1980s the size of new houses has grown exponentially. From 142m² during the 80s, to 166m² in the 90s, to 194 m² from 2000-2010. New houses built since 2010 are on average 205m²! So, while the size of families is decreasing, houses are getting bigger.

Again, what is the appropriate response of the church? Each year, churches, charities, community and iwi groups collectively invest hundreds of thousands of hours into mentoring programs, after-school programmes, and school breakfasts to meet the physical, mental and emotional needs of children and young people. But can such programs really replace parental involvement and the aroha of family? To what extent do such programs simply provide an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff but fail to address the fundamental factors that lead to family breakdown? Could it be that part of the problem is that we have allowed the value of the family to be seen as secondary or distinct from market values?

The very word ‘economics’ comes from the Greek word *oikonomia* meaning the ‘rules’ or laws (*nomos*) of the ‘household’ (*oikos*). By definition, economics is the study of the rules and laws exercised for the management of the whole household, yet, in our modern western societies, family values and questions of macro-economics are seen as belonging to radically different realms – one a matter of private morality, the other simply a given reality determined by market-forces such as demand, supply, surplus production and so on. This disassociation of market economics from questions of family life has devastating consequences. Is only economic production in the marketplace to be seen as profitable labour? What contribution does good home-making (parenting) make to our economy? And, can the success of the practice of ‘home-making’ really be measured solely according to economic calculations?

A recent report by the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research prepared for the lobby group ‘Family First’ estimated that the fiscal cost to the taxpayer of family breakdown and decreasing marriage rates is at least \$1 billion a year, and has cost about \$8 billion over the past decade.¹³ Social problems stemming from weakened families such as poor health, lower levels of education and increased crime are costs shared by society. But what if an economist were able to quantify into monetary terms the assets that strong families bring into society – what would that figure be? As well as saving money spent on mitigating social problems, what economic benefits would stem from more peaceful, harmonious and stable families?

There appears a general agreement that the ‘Working for Families’ initiative introduced by the previous government has had a positive effect in lowering rates of child poverty. But as well as tax policies are there other ways of responding to the

¹³ New Zealand Institute of Economic Research, ‘The Value of Family: Fiscal Benefits of Marriage and Reducing Family Breakdown in New Zealand’, (October 2008) <<http://www.familyfirst.org.nz/research>> (1 August 2011).

economic challenges faced by many New Zealand families?¹⁴ What other economic mechanisms could be used to assist New Zealand families? Does the minimum wage need to be lifted so that families can live on a single wage? British epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, in their highly influential book *The Spirit Level*, argue that the underlying cause of many of the problems that beset western societies – teenage pregnancy, depression, alcohol and drug addiction, obesity, violence (issues that have we have noted are both causes and symptoms of family breakdown) – is that of growing economic disparities. While historically New Zealand has been a relatively egalitarian and equal society, since the mid-1980s New Zealand’s income inequality has increased significantly. Of the 34 OECD member countries we now rank ninth worst for income inequality.¹⁵ Would economic and social policies that decreased income inequalities potentially be beneficial for families? And, beyond the question of economics, what other social and environmental policies could a government initiate to encourage and support more stable and cohesive family life?¹⁶

And what of the church? Have Christians, along with the rest of society, become fixated with ‘getting ahead’, with attaining and constantly increasing our standards of living? How different are the economic aspirations and desires of Christians from those of our non-Christian neighbours? Are Christian families and marriages any healthier than those of others within our communities?

We noted earlier how feminism has told women that they can have both successful careers while being mothers and maintaining healthy marriages. Yet, in the United States a new generation of highly educated women (and men) are questioning this

¹⁴ The importance of tax policy in responding to inequality issues is stated explicitly in a recent OECD report, which states: ‘Reforming tax and benefit policies is the most direct and powerful instrument to increase redistributive effects. Large and persistent losses of low-income groups following recessions underline the importance of well-targeted income-support policies. *Government transfers* – both in cash and in-kind – have an important role to play to guarantee that low-income households do not fall further back in the income distribution.’ OECD, ‘Growing Income Inequality in OECD Countries: What Drives it and How Can Policy Tackle it?’ (2 May, 2011)

<<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/32/20/47723414.pdf>>.

¹⁵ Economists use the Gini coefficient as a measure of inequality of a distribution. Of the OECD countries, only Italy, Portugal, Israel, USA, Mexico, United Kingdom, Turkey and Chile have greater GINI index (greater income inequality) than New Zealand. In Portugal, Turkey and Chile this income disparity is decreasing.

¹⁶ Intriguingly, one of effects of the current recession has been that families have chosen less expensive holiday options. During the summers of 2008/09 and 2009/10 record numbers of New Zealanders decided to return to the past and undertook family camping or tramping holidays, taking advantage of the change in policy from July 2008 in which all children under the age of 18 could camp or stay in huts free of charge on one of the nine Department of Conservation ‘Great Walks’. Are there other policies that could be introduced that would encourage and assist New Zealand families in having affordable quality family holidays together?

and other assumptions. Redefining feminism and the good life, these ‘radical homemakers’ seek to live lives based upon the simple principles of ecological sustainability, social justice, community engagement and family well-being.¹⁷ What would happen in New Zealand if Christians were to seek to become ‘radical homemakers’? Could the conscious intention of ‘downsizing’ economically and simplifying our lives by choosing to spend more time with our children and spouses, our neighbours, in our communities, and in our gardens, offer an alternative vision of family life? Far from being conservative and reactionary, what would it mean for our families and communities if Christian women and men took Proverbs 31 as their new mission statement?

‘Giving it the Bash’ - Family Violence

Undoubtedly, one of the most disturbing indicators that all is not well with New Zealand families is our level of family violence. New Zealand Police statistics show that in 2008 police officers attended 72,482 situations where family violence was suspected. Within these situations a total of 44,628 family violence offences were recorded. A total of 74,785 children were recorded as present at such family violence incidents and offences, and more disturbing is the fact that children are often caught up in this violence. Indeed, the Ministry of Social Development ‘2005 Social Report’ states that 20 confirmed cases of child abuse and/or neglect occur in New Zealand every day, while according to UNICEF data, per capita, New Zealand has the third highest rate of OECD countries for deaths of children through maltreatment. Stories such as the death of the Kahui twins in 2006 or Nia Glassie in 2007 are simply the worst and most public of thousands of episodes of abuse and maltreatment which occur in New Zealand homes each year. As troubling as such figures are, it is estimated that only 18 per cent of violence in New Zealand homes is actually reported to agencies.

How do we respond to such statistics? Do stiffer sentences for family violence provide a deterrent for such offences? What is the root cause of this violence and can this be overcome?

There is perhaps a disturbing irony in the fact that those most vocal about the protection of the ‘family unit’ were also the most outspoken about the Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act 2007, which removed the legal defence of ‘reasonable force’ for parents prosecuted for assault on their children. Critics of the

¹⁷ Shannon Hayes, *Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity From a Consumer Culture* (Richmondville, NY: Left to Write Press: 2010).

legislation may be correct in asserting that the Act will not lead to the immediate drop in family violence (though their other concern, that the legislation would lead to the criminalisation of hundreds of New Zealand parents has, thus far, been shown to be ill-founded), but rather than being seen in isolation, what if the legislation was recognised as another element in creating a new culture of non-violence?

Corporal punishment is illegal in state institutions such as prisons and mental hospitals, and has been banned in schools since 1990, so prior to the Act being passed the family was the final domain where such actions still had some legitimacy. Even so, critics are right. Legislation alone, working negatively by telling us what behaviour is unacceptable, will not be the magic solution to family violence. Rather, the key question is how do we positively create a new culture of non-violence? The 'It's not OK!' campaign led by the Ministry of Social Development and Families Commission has been very successful in raising the issue and getting New Zealanders discussing what previously has been something of a taboo subject. But how do we move beyond awareness-raising?

Considerable concern is expressed at the increasingly violent nature of our schools, with teachers and other students being assaulted. But should such violence surprise us if many children are coming from households marked by violence? Vigilance to ensure drugs, alcohol and weapons do not come onto school grounds may lower such acts of violence, but how do we as a society seek to deal with the heart of the issue? Would the introduction of conflict transformation and non-violent communication into the education curriculum begin to create a new generation with stronger relational skills, able to solve their difference peacefully?

Sexuality, Promiscuity, Pregnancy and Abortion

More disturbing evidence of the state of New Zealand families is seen in with regard to our teenage pregnancy rates. New Zealand has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the developed world, with about 51 teenage girls in every 1,000 falling pregnant. This known pregnancy rate (a combination of births and abortions) among young women (15 to 19 years) has not changed significantly since 1980. What is significant, however, is that in contrast to the 1980's, fewer and fewer of these women will now be married – and, more alarming, is that more and more teenage women are opting for abortion rather than parenthood.

The numbers of abortions and abortion rates have increased dramatically among young women since 1980, with over 18,000 abortions now being performed annually

in New Zealand. Among 15 to 19 year olds, the abortion rate more than doubled (from 11.4 per 1000 women in 2000 to 26 per 1000 in 2008) and the number of abortions increased from 3107 in 2000 to 4097 in 2008. Among women in the 20-24 age group, the abortion rate trebled from 12.3 per 1000 in 2000 to 36.7 per 1000 in 2008. The number of abortions among this age group rose from 4548 in 2000 to a peak of 5670 in 2003 before ending the period at 5396. Almost half of all pregnancies among 15-19 year olds and a third of pregnancies among the 20-24 age group end in abortion.

Undeniably, such figures should cause more than a little disquiet. For many Christians a belief in the sanctity of life leads to an active committed engagement to the question of abortion. But is there also the need for the Church to probe deeper and reflect upon the cause of these statistics?

In a non-scientific survey conducted by condom manufacturer Durex® in 2007, New Zealand women had the highest number of sexual partners – an average of 20.4.¹⁸ Such figures have led Timaru-based gynecologist Dr Albert Makary to call for a campaign against promiscuity. Makary, a Christian, observes a connection between promiscuity and binge-drinking and believes that we have created ‘a culture which says if you can remember what happened yesterday you haven't had enough fun’. Makary believes that Kiwi society has ‘normalised’ drunkenness and promiscuity and states that ‘Sex education focused on safe sex implied that sleeping around was okay “as long as you're wearing the right gear”’. Makary continues: “There's a lot of pressure on the kids. This culture doesn't only affect those subscribing to it. It affects those who don't subscribe by being marginalised and ostracised.”¹⁹

And what's wrong with promiscuity? Far from being seen as ‘party-poopers’, it is important that Christians affirm the delight and joy of sexual expression. Sexuality is a wonderful God-given gift. Yet, the problem with promiscuity is that it cheapens ‘sex’, turning it into a purely physical activity in which the other partner, like a consumer acquisition, is used and then discarded. Such behavior not only has potentially serious physical consequences (the spread of STIs) but also causes short-term and long-term relational difficulties.

¹⁸ New Zealand was also the only country in the survey where women had more partners than their male counterparts.

¹⁹ Simon Collins, ‘NZ women promiscuous – doctor’, NZ Herald, 9 July 2011, <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10737380> (2 August 2011).

Makary's observation on the creation of a culture is also important. Teenagers' attitudes and values with regard to sexuality are shaped by role-models, peers and the general milieu of contemporary culture. Teenagers have always experimented with sex, drugs and alcohol, and to expect the current generation to act differently is perhaps a little naïve. But how do we start to bring about a cultural change? What effective policies and programmes may the church promote that could respond to this situation?

One suggested option has been abstinence programs aimed at teenagers, as have existed in the United States since the 1980s. However, even though funded by the Federal Government and expanded under the presidency of George W Bush Jr., such programmes have, unsurprisingly, proven ineffective in the States, and it is doubtful whether they would be any more successful in New Zealand. Why? Maybe, because as useful as such value-based programmes and public campaigns are, there are other competing values being conveyed to our children and adolescents by far more glamorous means.

For, while parents and peers are vital in shaping teenagers' values, it is worth considering what role contemporary media plays in shaping teenage perspectives on sexuality. How does the constant stream of images on television and computer screens shape the values of teenagers? While previous generations grew up with, at the most, chaste kisses on screen, now sexual references and behaviour are common on television programmes from 8.30pm onwards, while the graphic nature of contemporary music videos (played endlessly on Channel Four) have led to them being described by some as 'soft-porn'.²⁰ Even innocent pre-teen celebrities such as Miley Cyrus, the star of Disney's 'Hannah Montana', inevitably grow up and conform to expectations by producing more sexualized music videos.

How does one protect children and adolescents from these images? While formerly R-rated movies and strict television conditions made access more difficult, the internet has changed everything. Sex is, by far, the biggest business on the world-wide-web.²¹ How do we prevent young people from being exposed to increasingly violent and sexual imagery? What is the balance between free-speech, individual liberties and access to information and the protection of others? Should there be

²⁰ Annie Lennox – no shrinking violet herself, having during her own career appeared on Eurythmics' 'Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)' album dressed as a masked dominatrix fame – states in an interview that 'I'm all for erotica, I love it, but the values that I see on pop videos are like soft porn': Lousie France, 'Pop Videos now are like Soft Porn', *The Observer*, 26 June, 2005, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2005/jun/26/popandrock>> (29 July 2011).

²¹ Type 'sex' into Google search engine and you'll get 2,840,000,000 results!

tighter censorships and control or does this run counter to freedom of expression and access to information?

Into the Future

Raising children and nurturing healthy relationships in the context of a world facing considerable economic and ecological challenges will continue to be challenging. As well as the issues we have explored – economics, violence and pregnancy – there are numerous others that confront contemporary New Zealand families. *It is important to realise that ‘family values’ are not separate and distinct policies but rather that all policies (economic, social, educational, environmental) rolled out by a government have consequences for the family unit. While your own family may not be affected by certain policies, other families will.* What does this mean, therefore, for how we exercise our democratic right to vote?

Margaret Thatcher famously quipped that there is no such thing as a society, just individuals. Operating within such a mindset, the exercising of one’s democratic right is, ultimately, an action of self-interest. In contrast to this, the Church’s declaration is that it is one family joined in Christ. What would happen if we were to take this analogy and regard the society we are part of, in similar terms, simply as a giant family? Clearly we owe a duty of care towards others within that family. How will our vote affect (positively and negatively) not merely our own immediate family but other families that surround us? What might it mean for us to vote to ensure that the younger, weaker, more vulnerable members of our family do not merely not suffer, but rather are able to thrive and flourish – to enjoy the ‘fullness of life’ which Jesus came to announce?²²

²² Such thinking of course is not novel, but rather is articulated by the Apostle Paul using the imagery of the Body.