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Justice and Change in the Family

> Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home — so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood s/he lives in; the school or college s/he attends; the factory, farm, or office where s/he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.
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> — *Eleanor Roosevelt*

On moving to a new community, the Smith-Lam family (not their real name) joined the local Anglican church. They were a complex family. The parents had remarried and were from different ethnic backgrounds. They already had children of their own — a preteen older daughter from the mother's previous marriage, and two teenage sons from the father's previous marriage. Into this complex household arrived the wife's eighty-six-year-old widowed mother. This "blended family" was fraught with conflicts. The challenge of ministering to the diverse needs of the family became clear to the youth pastor at the local church when one

of the older teenage sons got into trouble with the law for using drugs and was jailed.

Our Christian calling is to model relationships of equality, respect, and dignity in our homes. Major changes both in our own lives and in society may require that we rethink and redefine relationships in marriage and family. This is particularly evident in gender relationships. Paradigm change in families can happen in four areas — *structurally* by a reconfiguration of tasks and roles; *politically* in the balance of power relations; *relationally* in the way individuals interact with one another; and *culturally* in attitudes, beliefs, and patterns of behaviour change that result from cultural shifts.

The global reach of modernity has challenged gender and family relationships in both more and less industrialized nations. One result is the breakdown of economic cooperation between the sexes and between generations. Another is the de-institutionalization of marriage as seen in rising rates of separation and divorce, temporary cohabitation, children born outside marriage, male migration, and family desertion. The juggernaut of economic growth at any cost pays almost no attention to just relationships in family life. Its focus on individual achievement has exacted a terrible price and has failed to take into consideration another paradigm altogether, namely, a *communal* one.

Women and children typically come off badly. The harsh reality is that one in every three children in large Canadian cities is living in poverty and dependent on food banks. Unsurprisingly, there is a strong correlation with the poverty of mothers. Single mothers, urban aboriginals, recent immigrants, the disabled, and elderly women are among those identified as poor. November

2004 marked the fifteenth anniversary of the all-party House of Commons resolution to end child poverty in Canada. Today one in six children still lives in poverty — one million children too many.

Issues of gender and family justice often surface in immigrant families, even beyond the first generation. Our Canadian cities are increasingly becoming home to people from a rich diversity of cultural backgrounds. Toronto, for example, has been named by the United Nations for five consecutive years as the most multicultural city in the world. In such a context, people of different backgrounds struggle to maintain their identities, their cultures, and their family traditions and values in the face of the prevailing Canadian culture and the demands of urban life and market-driven economics.

The effect is often devastating in the lives of women — many may find work in factories and so are co-earners, but they may come home to traditional expectations of domestic labour. Even in two-parent families where young fathers are helping out with family tasks and child-rearing, statistics indicate that mothers working outside the home still bear the larger burden of the "second shift" of housework, with a resulting breakdown in their physical and emotional health. In fact, a publication by the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, entitled *Women, Paid/Unpaid Work and Stress,* has indicated that this second shift is the most serious health hazard that Canadian women face.

The problem is not restricted to immigrant women. The report looks at the realities of single mothers, as well as immigrant women, in its extensive survey of women's work-related stress and illness. Among single mothers in Canada, 59% live in poverty. Among women over the age of seventy-five, 36% live in poverty.

Among the urban poor, lack of daycare and lack of adequate subsidized housing are seen as major impediments to the im-

provement of women's and children's situations. The Canadian economy does *not* adequately invest in children. Governments proclaim a "children's agenda" but concentrate on fiscal responsibility, which often means cutting welfare payments, reducing subsidies for daycare spaces, and ending the construction of new housing for low income families. The gap between known need and investment keeps growing. Religious and other civil society institutions are not equipped to fill the breach, and are not as involved as they might be in movements for structural change.

Poverty and families

Recent statistics have shown that, in spite of the federal surplus, food bank use in Canada has continued to rise. "Federal surplus exceeds expectations; food bank use exceeds fears," says Citizens for Public Justice, a Christian public justice organization. CPJ goes on to say that, even though poverty rates have fallen from the depths reached in the mid-1990s, structural poverty rates (based on the use of food banks and other social services) have actually risen.

Food bank use and child poverty are serious social issues, affecting the life of the working poor and those on public welfare. CPJ's Greg deGroot-Magetti writes: "In 2003, while Canada is one of the richest countries in the world — of all time — we cannot ensure that no Canadian child will go hungry. Far from it. Thousands of our neighbours — women, children, and men — during any given month, cannot be sure how they are going to put food on the table" [*The Catalyst*, 2003, vol. 26, no. 6].

I am a member of a congregation that has a large food bank — in fact, the second largest in downtown Toronto, feeding thousands a year. St. Peter's food bank grew in use as the Ontario government's "common sense revolution" withdrew from

its social responsibilities in the name of the fiscal bottom line. Such public neglect, as CPJ says, "generated the long lines at food banks that were so familiar to our parents and grandparents.... Successful social policy is about more than accountability and transparency. Successful social policies improve the lives of people and communities. It safeguards the economic well-being of people during vulnerable periods. It strengthens civic vitality and builds more inclusive communities."

When we neglect the public square, and protect only the private sphere of the affluent, all of us suffer. Families suffer alienation. Parents suffer shame. Children suffer hunger. The church is called to speak prophetically to remind us of what constitutes justice for all. Christians are called to grapple with issues of injustice.

Not only do clergy, therapists, teachers, doctors, and other members of the helping professions need to learn more about the effects of global modernity on gender and family relations, but so also do Christian laity. The fact is, families of all kinds today are under siege, facing the consequences that globalization, individualism, and the atomization of our society have produced. Here are a few of the challenges facing families:

- increasing divorce, resulting in the absence of fathers and the pauperization of women and children;
- the complexities of remarried and blended family systems, some of which are same-sex partnerships;
- the disturbing increase in numbers of children in foster care;
- the challenges of immigration, intermarriage between people of different cultures, and the resulting cross-cultural families; and
- a variety of medical-ethical issues ranging from reproductive technologies (such as in vitro fertilization) to questions of life and death (such as abortion, euthanasia, and embryonic stem cell research).

Family structures in transition

Just as human beings are varied and diverse, so there is no single definition of a household; rather, there is a rich variety of constellations of relationships and commitments. Here are a few examples:

- a member of the "boomerang generation" returning home to parents who were formerly "empty-nesters";
- an immigrant extended family with multi-generational members living together;
- a single adult living alone;
- a single-parent family (usually woman-led) with children and no other significant adult involved;
- a shared custody arrangement of children living equally with both separated (or divorced) parents;
- a nuclear family living, without supports, with a severely disabled child or young adult;
- a gay or lesbian couple in a committed partnership, with or without adopted children; and
- grandparents bringing up grandchildren, often without support from the children's parents or the state.

Family Service Canada's national newsletter, *Let's Talk Families*, frequently looks at family diversity and change and comments on major Statistics Canada studies.

The figures consistently show that the Canadian "family" is undergoing fundamental change. People today are less likely to marry than they were two decades ago. Those who marry tend to do so at older ages. Marriages have also become less permanent; Statistics Canada has estimated that 31% of all marriages will eventually end in divorce.

Divorce and high rates of remarriage mean that children are now more likely to live with a step-parent. In 1995 about half of the 430,000 stepfamilies were headed by common-law

couples. Parents in stepfamilies tend to be in their middle years. By contrast, the vast majority — 85% — of lone-parent families are headed by women who tend to be young; over one-third are under age thirty-five.

Marcia Almay of Statistics Canada wrote: "In the 1980s, the number of common-law unions in Canada more than doubled. During the same period, the number of married couples and lone-parent families also rose, but proportionally these increases were much smaller than those for common-law families. As a result, common-law couples made up 10% of all families in 1991." The 2001 Census reports that 20% more Canadian couples than in 1995 are choosing cohabitation instead of marriage. More than half of women in their twenties reported living with a partner before committing to marriage.

"It may be the end of the *Leave It to Beaver* family," said Robert Glossop, director of programs at the Vanier Institute of the Family in Ottawa. "We used to think there was a single portrait of the family in the 1950s; now we have a gallery of diverse images. There's no single portrait" [personal interview with Robert Glossop, December 2003].

Alan Mirabelli of the Vanier Institute noted as far back as September 1989 (in *Let's Talk Families)* that traditional views on marriage are changing and that couples were no longer seeking approval from either the state or church.

> How can we design policies for families when we have so much trouble defining them? We used to define family relationships with reference to the formal bonds of matrimony. Now we look at what families do and the commitments of family members to one another. We have come to define family as ... any combination of two or more persons who are bound together by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement and who, together, assume responsibilities for ... and care of ... members.

Marriage and other forms of domestic partnerships are about making a *personal* commitment. Yet David Reed, professor of theology at Wycliffe College in Toronto, is quoted in Toronto's *Metro Today* [18 July 2002] as saying: "These [2001 census] statistics reflect the current suspicion of all institutions, whether political, economical, or religious institutions." Reed observes that today's younger generation have a "take it or leave it mind set" because they are afraid of making the same mistakes their parents did. "They have a higher expectation of marriage but they don't have the confidence that they can actually attain that ... [and] when a relationship starts going sour, the instinct is to end it rather than working through the problems."

In March 2003, Emory University's Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Religion (CISR) brought together seventy scholars and six hundred attendees for lectures and panel discussions about problems facing contemporary families, and about the role that the "religions of the book" (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) might play. John Witte, Jr., director of CISR, was quoted as saying that tracking the "intricacies and intimacies" of family life today helps make clear "the principles that will dominate questions about sex, marriage, and family into the 21st century" [Emory University news release, 2 April 2003].

The conference discussed such issues as in vitro fertilization, contraception, adoption, abortion, same-sex marriages, rising rates of divorce, father absence, single unwed mothers, and interfaith unions. Rebecca Chopp, president of Colgate University and a speaker at the conference, had this to say:

> To some, the order has become disorder. To some, the oppressive order has been loosened. But family life has never had one name. Family has never had a life in Eden. The greatest family value of all must be continual adaptation.

She went on to describe the shift from fixed, rigid systems,

to open, permeable boundaries. Chopp challenged her audience about the future:

> The birth control pill was a watershed moment. Contraception and reproductive technology uncoupled sex and marriage and family. The "ands" became much more ambiguous ... we used to debate property rights, now we worry about the ownership of eggs and sperm ... how do we shape the social order if the family isn't at the center?... questions about abuse, economics, "quality time" for parenting, and the presence of fathers will continue to occupy us ... but beyond the religious, legal, biological, and cultural codes that ground families, the meaning of family must be re-imagined [Emory University news release, 2 April 2003].

Many Christians have taken up the cry for justice in the changing family. Christian feminist scholar Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, in *After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation,* and in *My Brother's Keeper*, writes passionately about the ongoing patriarchal entrenchment of our culture, mother-headed post-divorce households, and the pauperization of women. Her observations and conclusions concur with the well-documented longitudinal studies of American post-divorce life described in the work of Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee in their books *Second Chances: Men, Women, and Children a Decade After Divorce,* and *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study*.

The church and family healing

Not only are family relationships varied and complex, but so also are the ways in which they break down. Educational and family support programs run by churches help to alleviate the scope of these problems, but dedicated clergy and lay workers report serious family life issues, such as

- families seeking healing from multigenerational patterns of addictions, violence, or sexual abuse;
- family members divided over the controversial question of "recovered memories" of abuse;
- families in crisis because a member suffers a mental illness so serious that he or she can no longer live at home. All too often governments have ceased to provide suitable housing or care for such people; instead, they release psychiatric patients into a non-existent "community";
- families who lose a teenager to the drug culture and are devastated to find their son or daughter has become a "street kid";
- families of the working poor, squeezed out of the house ownership and rental market, often having to rely on shelters and food banks to survive;
- families with a sole parent, left abandoned after a divorce, and children suffering untold repercussions;
- families composed of same-sex couples longing for their unions to be blessed by their faith community;
- families unable or unwilling to support a teenage girl struggling with whether to have an abortion or to bear a child;
- families who lack adequate *child* care for parents working outside the home;
- families lacking adequate *elder* care, creating great stress for what has come to be called the "sandwich generation," struggling to raise a younger generation with inadequate time or resources to care for their aging parents.

At the 1987 Singapore Consultation of the International Family Network, to which I was a Canadian delegate, delegates from every province of the Anglican Communion described family violence as a serious problem. Spousal abuse (physical, emotional, sexual) was understood to be widespread and had no cultural or geographic boundaries. Child abuse, however, was seen as a more horrific problem, and perceived by our sisters

and brothers in the developing world as being endemic to the more affluent West, who they believed had long since devalued children and family life.

In particular, child sexual abuse and the dispersion of child pornography (subsequently more widespread with the advent of the Internet) was perceived to be a sign of the decadence of capitalism, infiltrating developing countries through sex tourism and resulting in increased trafficking of poor children and youth in the sex trade. In all the discussions of the consultation, both formal and informal, concern about family violence was central. How can we, as Christian followers of the Prince of Peace, be agents of reconciliation and justice-seekers in both our personal and our church families? The issues surrounding family violence bring together issues of gender justice, the rights of children, sexual ethics, and the meaning of Christian peacemaking.

Since that consultation, the plight of child soldiers, child labourers, and child sex-trade workers has increasingly come before the public eye. In 2000 Canada hosted the UN Conference on Children of War and signed the declaration banning child soldiers. Canada has also introduced legislation that will allow our government to prosecute pedophiles accused of using children in the sex trade at home and abroad. Numerous warnings are publicized for parents to beware of and to monitor their children's use of the Internet, outlining the dangers of predators contacting children and youth through chat lines.

Canada has laws and social services to prevent and assist healing from violence and sexual abuse within families and communities. Child Welfare authorities are meant to implement child protection laws and support vulnerable families in order to help prevent child abuse. For seniors there is a government program — Strategy to Combat Elder Abuse. Anglicans have been prominent among those who have advocated for laws to address all aspects of violence against women, children, and the elderly.

In the wake of sexual abuse scandals reported in churches in all parts of the country, the Anglican Diocese of Toronto in 1990 developed one of the church's first sexual misconduct policies. This policy highlighted our Christian calling to be a healing and restorative community, and became an inspiration for other dioceses and denominations to follow suit. Likewise, the Anglican Church has consistently raised the issue of spousal abuse and promoted a position of zero tolerance for violence within the family.

It is now common *to pray* for any who are victims of violence or abuse in their homes, *to preach* about non-violence in the family, and *to teach* through ministries for children and youth, and in marriage preparation and enrichment, that our calling in Christ is to model relationships of equality, respect, and dignity within our homes. Teaching concrete skills such as anger management, conflict resolution, and good listening skills, as well as helping children learn not to bully others or stay silent when abuse occurs, is part of helping the next generation to become peacemakers at home and in the world.

Our Christian calling to family justice

The often controversial and always soul-searing task of restoring justice to family life — our own family or someone else's — requires both a compassionate worldview and a supportive community so that we are neither defeated nor burnt out by the work involved. But we live in a consumer culture of greed and covetousness, where people as well as things are used and discarded. The question for many, Christians sadly included, is not "How can I be of service?" but "What do I get out of it?" As followers of Jesus, we are challenged by Christ's example of compassion when confronted with the twofold calling of pursuing, both in

private and in public, the act of maintaining faithful relations with others and pursuing justice for all.

As Christians in a society devoted to instant gratification, we do not find it easy to practise the kind of self-denying discipleship needed to love our neighbour. When the neighbour is someone

> The story goes that some time ago a man punished his five-year-old daughter for wasting a roll of expensive gold wrapping paper. Money was tight and he became upset when the child used the gold paper to decorate a box to put under the Christmas tree. Nevertheless, on Christmas morning the little girl brought the gift to her father and said, "This is for you, Daddy." The father was embarrassed by his earlier overreaction, but his anger flared again when he opened the present and found the box was empty. He spoke to her in a harsh manner: "Don't you know, young lady, when you give someone a present there's supposed to be something inside the package?"
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> The little girl looked up at him with tears in her eyes and said, "Oh, Daddy, it's not empty. I blew kisses into it until it was full." The father was crushed. He fell on his knees and put his arms around his little daughter, and asked her to forgive him for his anger.
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> An accident took the life of the child only a short time later, and it is told that the father kept that gold box by his bed for the rest of his life. Whenever he was discouraged or faced difficult problems, he would open the box and take out an imaginary kiss and remember the love of the child who had put it there.
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> In a very real sense, each of us as human beings has been given a golden box filled with unconditional love and kisses from our children, partners, family, friends, and God. Such a gift is more precious than all the things money can buy, and we need to remind ourselves to treasure it above all else.
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> *— Author unknown*

we live with — a member of our own family — the task may be even more challenging.

In the private sphere, maintaining relationships of fidelity takes patience and commitment to work things through together, not easy recipes or quick fixes. In the public sphere, as the church seeks to pursue justice in the context of a globalized economy, we in the pews are frequently embarrassed by child poverty in our own backyard, as well as the evils of child labour and sweatshops in distant places that sustain the fashion industry and other aspects of our consumer lifestyle. In the realm of nature, as the ecosystem is being destroyed by corporate exploitation, our aboriginal brothers and sisters call us to be stewards of the creation and we ignore them at our peril.

The gospels record that Jesus welcomed the children, the "little ones," and held them up as role models of faith. But children need households in which to be born, to grow, and be nurtured. We must ask ourselves, "What does it mean for us to do justice and to seek mercy for God's little ones?" These children are in our midst — in our families, churches, classrooms, neighbourhoods, dormitories, reformatories. And within each one of us there lives the child we once were. *Here is where the public and the private interface.*

We are called to love our neighbour as ourselves, but if we ignore our own pain and do not learn compassion for our own brokenness, then often we cannot be truly merciful to others. We hide, we erect defences, we avoid getting involved. When we "walk by on the other side of the road" and ignore the call to be like the good Samaritan, showing compassion for our neighbour [Luke 10:25–37], we do so because to get close to someone else's pain brings us too close to our own. We are terrified of our own pain, afraid to face the shame that often binds us.

From a Christian point of view, the family is more than a basic

social unit. It is a sphere where God is at work in us, shaping and moulding us so that we may share Christ's life of love. If in the family we seek to be "rooted and grounded in the love of Christ," as St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians puts it, we can learn to be people who grow in love and bring love to a wider community. These are the "family values" that count.

Jesus himself never held up one exclusive model of family structure. In fact, in Mark 3:31–35, where it is recorded that his mother and brothers came to see him, Jesus's response shows that he includes many others in how he defines family. "Whoever does the will of God," he explains, "is my brother and sister and mother." From then on, kinship through blood was enlarged to include all those who chose to do the will of God.

The early church community behaved like a kinship group, eating together in various homes and sharing their possessions in common. The family, then, is an intentional community within which the biological family, the adoptive family, and the group made a family through "adoption" by faith are important in the raising and nurture of children. The call to love one another means that we treat each other like kin, in equality and with respect for the dignity of each, so that both individuals and families may thrive.

In other words, Christian believers are called to realize the presence of God in our midst and in one another, and to value and support those characteristics of community that are foundational to healthy families (see chart in the Introduction, p. 17). Such characteristics make it possible for all people — whether heterosexual or homosexual, male or female, old or young, rich or poor, healthy or disabled, black, red, brown, yellow, or white — to sustain relationships of intimacy, connectedness, and nurture, providing opportunities for creativity, and fostering mutual support and interdependence.

A welcoming community of faith makes room for the complex structure of the Smith-Lam family, described at the beginning of this chapter. The bonds of love and faithfulness can be encouraged in the Smith-Lam family by the support and care of their church during the difficult months of court proceedings, when their son can receive pastoral visits in prison and his parents and siblings can be upheld in prayer.

Biblical faith informs us that our goal is the flourishing of persons, individually and communally, and households are foundational communities. Jesus said, "I call you not servants, but friends" [John 15:15]. Our task then, as his friends in an age when families are under pressure, is to re-imagine and re-create household communities as the embodiment of justice and love.

What we can do

Here are some suggestions for creating just household structures, to encourage and sustain family community and cohesiveness:

- Everyone (adult and child, male and female) shares in the maintenance, cleaning, and care of the home and garden. Housework and yard work are not subject to gender or age divisions of "Mom's" versus "Dad's" jobs. Such cooperative care of the household teaches a basic sense of fairness.
- Everyone (male and female, young and old) learns to care for the weaker or most vulnerable members of the family, including the pets. Care-giving is not merely "women's work."
- Everyone has an age-appropriate share, however small, of the family finances, to spend as they see fit, and to save for special occasions or gifts. Money is to be shared, not possessed by only the major wage earner(s).

- Everyone shares in an age-appropriate way in major decisions that affect the family as a whole — moves, holidays, school events, etc.
- Informal but regular family meetings allow for open communication and resolution of conflicts or differences among family members, and help to keep relationships open and growing.
- Professional help is enlisted when anger management and conflict resolution become problems, and before these escalate into family violence, whether spousal abuse, elder abuse, child abuse, or sibling abuse.
- Everyone learns to accept people as they are, refusing to isolate or ostracize a family member because of some difference (for example, someone being gay, or wanting to leave home sooner or stay home longer than their siblings have, or suffering a physical or intellectual disability, or being unable to complete school, or being depressed).

Resources

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