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WHAT'S HAPPENING TO FAMILIES?

By David Phillips

Every generation imagines that moral standards in society have deteriorated as compared to the past. Plato is reputed to have quoted Socrates as saying "*The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they allow disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise*". The authenticity of the quotation is far from certain but it appears to be a common sentiment through history. Whether or not we think in these terms today one fact is clearly established by statistics; traditional nuclear families are in trouble.

A quarter of children now live in lone-parent families. Of two-parent families one fifth involve step-relationships. That means that around four in every ten children live in a family where one or both of their natural parents are missing. To this we can add the fact that a fifth of all couples are co-habiting rather than married (Source: General Household Survey 2006).

Anyone working with young people will know that this is more than just a matter of statistics. On occasion the heartbreaks of broken families becomes all too apparent. We should not imagine that the past was a golden age, it is easy to forget the dreadful poverty, high mortality rates and children left fatherless by war and motherless by death in childbirth, but we are witnessing today the apparent gradual collapse of marriage and families. These are matters that should concern us. They also show us something of the deep social needs around us and many churches are seeking to rise to the challenge both of addressing those needs and modeling a better way.

The last 40 years

In 1970 Alan Stibbs wrote an article for Churchman looking at issues relating to families (available on the Church Society website. What struck me after recently reading the article is that when Stibbs refers to children about to be born into families he is speaking of those who are now in their 30s, and when he speaks of existing families that includes those who were then children but are now in their 40s, which includes me. Stibbs makes a number of observations about families which makes a useful starting point to consider the changes of the last 40 years:

Families were isolated, no longer part of a wider community. In some areas there are still larger family networks but in most places today people are even more isolated. In addition, I have been aware in raising children, of our reluctance, and that of other parents, to let children out alone in the way that I was when younger. The use of the internet is a constant area of concern. Yet it does allow children to interact with others and though it may have limitation and problems it must be better for children than just sitting in front of a television.

The lack of natural communities is a challenge to which churches rise and one feature of this response is the number of churches now seeking youth and family workers. Sadly, at the same time regulations and red tape have made some work with young people increasingly difficult.

Families were no longer large and unplanned but small and planned. Stibbs believed that there was a consequent danger of children being pandered to and spoilt. Today families are even smaller. In 1971 the average number of children per household was 2.0, whereas in 2006 it was 1.7. Thus families are still shrinking and if Stibbs was right to be concerned then we have all the more reason to be so.

Families were much more cared for by the state than previously. This was a good thing leading to

improved opportunities and education. Today, if anything, Christians are concerned about too much state interference in the family. Most recently some parents have been threatened with legal action because they withdrew their children from school lessons which were glorifying sexual immorality. In addition young teens can gain contraception and abortions apparently without their parents ever being told. Thus families are undermined. In addition, whereas 10 or 20 years ago taxation policy encouraged marriage and the idea that one of the parents might not work in order to care for children today there are little benefits and it has even been claimed recently that it is more beneficial financially for parents to separate (though I have to say that I could not understand the figures used to support this claim).

Families were much more comfortable in 1970 than they had been in the past, and we can only say that we are even more comfortable now. We may occasionally decry material possessions but few of us I think would really want to go back 40 years in our comforts. I may like to shock my children by talking about having no central heating and only two black and white television channels but I don't regret either transformations any more than I think my mother missed the days of using the scrubbing board and hand ringer which I can remember in my grandmother's kitchen.

Related to some of the above, Stibbs also asserted that children were spoilt and that there was a decline of discipline in the home which spilt over outside the home. The cry would be the same today and probably in every generation. Whilst we may look back 40 years and say that things are worse we would have to be honest and say that they are also far better than they have been at times in history. One significant change in recent years has been state interference in discipline both in the home and in education. Many claim that the breakdown of discipline in schools is having a detrimental effect on the education of children.

There are it seems good grounds for concern regarding children and families and this concern must therefore be for society as a whole. As Christians we feel that this is part of a more general abandoning of Biblical norms by our society and symptomatic of a deeper moral decay. Ultimately it is hard to imagine that people will accept Biblical teaching unless they first accept the authority of the Bible which in turn will be a fruit of their acceptance of Christ. Nevertheless, there is an argument from common grace. Marriage was established by God from the beginning. It was not something commanded only to his particular people. As Stibbs remarked in a following article "*When God created man he created male and female, two in one; and he made them capable of giving birth to a third - the child; and, indeed to several children - the family.*" Marriage and the family are meant for all humanity and indeed has been found amongst virtually every, if not every, branch of the family of Adam and Eve. This leads us to conclude that marriage and families are good and have positive benefits. So it may be possible to persuade others, despite their unwillingness to accept the commands of God, that those commands are nevertheless best for us.

David Phillips is General Secretary of Church Society.