

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

KA11

HAPPY FAMILIES

Two reports published in the last few months have both drawn attention to what is happening to families in Britain and children in particular. The Cabinet Office Strategy Unit and Department for Children, Schools and Families produced an evidence paper, *Families in Britain*¹ in December 2008 and The Children's Society published a report *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age*² in February 2009. The latter consisted of evidence from over 30,000 people, including 20,000 children. The research was far-reaching and the press have picked it up and run with such headlines as *British parents: making our children miserable*.³ The quality of childhoods of British children has worsened over the last 30 years and this is laid at the door of 'excessive individualism' and the unwillingness of adults and parents to contribute to the lives of others and those of their own children in particular.

Families in Britain is 110 pages long and contains analyses of many surveys and research findings.

It is possible to 'cherry pick' those parts of this report which highlight issues of concern to evangelical Christians. However there does seem to be some agreement with our concerns, however guarded:

- Increased prosperity and wealth have not contributed to satisfaction and happiness.
- Where there is marriage it does result in successful outcomes for families.
- Lone parenthood disadvantages children.
- Healthy family stability and good relationships between partners results in positive outcomes for families.

¹ Online:
<http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DCSF-01077-2008>.

² Online:http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/all_about_us/how_we_do_it/the_good_childhood_inquiry/1818.

³ The Week, 7 February 2009.

This theme is echoed in *A Good Childhood* which reports that two-thirds of children rate 'parents getting on well' as one of the most important factors in their lives.

Recommendations from *A Good Childhood* include:

- Advice to parents on making a commitment to each other, establishing boundaries for their children and helping children to develop spiritual qualities.
- Advice to teachers to help children develop happy, likeable social personalities and setting teaching about sex and relationships within a context of social and emotional learning.
- Advice to government to introduce free civil birth ceremonies, offer parenting classes and training 1,000 more highly-qualified psychological therapists in the next five years.
- Advice to the media to rethink the amount of violence they put out.
- Advice to advertisers to stop encouraging premature sexualisation, heavy drinking and over-eating.

The *Families in Britain* report sees a place for government and organisations in the private and voluntary sector to work in partnership with families in providing 'family functions.'

This report provides an open door for churches. Here are just a few suggestions of how churches could use their existing resources to minister to the needs highlighted by this report:

- Have a book-table of parenting resources at the entrance where children are collected from children's clubs and youth groups.
- Provide similar resources at toddler groups.
- Have regular times for sharing 'parenting tips' at toddler groups.
- Invite local councillors to toddler groups to give them an idea of how you are serving the local community.

Both reports provide an impetus for churches to be in the forefront of bringing spiritual help to schools and taking a lead in values-led PHSE classes.

Both reports also devote some space to gender roles and working women and the pressures they face in balancing home life and work life.

The press have recently drawn attention to the findings of the mental health charity MIND that the pressures of managing the responsibilities of work, home and family are taking their toll on women in their 40s and 50s.⁴ Juggling with these roles, and the heavy burden they bring, is causing soaring stress levels among women. The fear of being stigmatised as a sufferer from a mental health problem is discouraging them from seeking help. NHS figures are quoted, stating that 'the number of 45 to 64 year old women with a common mental disorder rose from 20.5% in 1993 to 25.2% in 2007.'

⁴ Online:<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/4360096/Middle-aged-women-suffering-from-mental-health-problems>.

According to *Families in Britain*, although attitudes to gender roles have changed, people are more conservative when it comes to mothers of pre-school children. Apparently 53% of non-working mothers gave as their reason for not working the desire to be with their children.

The 'ammunition' in these reports is sufficient to support a campaign for tax breaks for married couples and families and increases in maternity leave for women. Policy-makers should be urged to rethink the present drive to get all women back into paid work while their children are young.

What can churches do? Perhaps there is a place for women to be encouraged to work for one another (for example, childminding or cleaning) in creative and flexible ways to maximise the time mothers can spend with small children?

Organisations such as *Full Time Mothers* (www.fulltimemothers.org) and *What About The Children?* (www.whataboutthechildren.org.uk) can provide helpful information. Both these groups are also involved in lobbying in support of tax benefits which would allow for more parental choice in connection with child care.

Sheila Stephen

The above was published in The Bulletin [March 2009]

Salt and Light Papers is a series of occasional papers on contemporary issues of social concern. It is published online by the Affinity Social Issues Team. Its purpose is to help Christians to think through questions of relevance to our place in the world around us. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Social Issues Team.

The Old Bank House, 17 Malpas Road, Newport, South Wales. NP20 5PA
Telephone: 01633 893925
Email: office@affinity.org.uk
Website: www.affinity.org.uk

affinity
gospel churches in partnership