



State of the Family

The Ideal Family

Those who have long memories or watch retro television may recall the families depicted by Donna Reed, Ozzie and Harriet Nelson, and Ward and June Cleaver. Whether these kinds of families ever really existed in the 1950's is debatable; but even so, they are sometimes held up as the ideal for what a family should be: low-key, cooperative, communicative, ever-present, and loving. Some people may long for that type of ideal in their own family or in families in general, but the truth is that the Cleavers don't live here anymore. Maybe they never did!

We can continue to point to the seemingly perfect TV families as the ideal, but to do so is a disservice. Real families experience challenges that often create stress; and in order to grow in love and commitment to one another, they must invest time and energy to work through those challenges.

What Is a Family?

What is this thing we call *family*? The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church proclaims, "We believe the family to be the basic human community through which persons are nurtured and sustained in mutual love, responsibility, respect, and fidelity." However, the denomination recognizes that there are more configurations of a family than what we sometimes call the "nuclear family"—a two-generational set of relationships and responsibilities, namely a husband, wife, and at least one child.

In 1965, 60 percent of all children lived in families with a breadwinner father and a stay-at-home mother. The 2006 US Census Bureau indicates that "only 15 percent of all American families resembled the so-called typical American family, that is, a married couple who are the biological parents of two children, where the father works outside the home and the mother is a homemaker." According to a study done by Jan Hare and Lizbeth A. Gray, eight major types of families exist, with subgroupings in some of them, thus making more distinct and different families:

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The Session at a Glance

Today families undergo many challenges. What are those challenges, and how are families coping with them? How can individual Christians and churches provide families with nurture and support?

Meet Our Writers

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- ◆ Married nuclear families
- ◆ Cohabiting families
- ◆ Single-parent families
- ◆ Blended families and stepfamilies
- ◆ Grandparent-led families
- ◆ Families in which the adult or adults are lesbian or gay
- ◆ Commuter families
- ◆ Foster and group-home families

Census figures reflecting 2004 surveys show nearly 62 percent of the nation's 73 million children live with both biological parents. However, some still rely on extended family, foster care, communal living, and other relationships to "nurture and sustain in mutual love, responsibility, respect, and fidelity." Often the "2-parent, 2.4-children home" undergoes not only pressures but living changes caused by death, divorce, job placement or loss, war, or illness.

Blaine Harden, a writer for *The Washington Post*, reports that "married couples with children now occupy fewer than one in every four households—a share that has been slashed in half since 1960 and is the lowest ever recorded by the census." As of 2000, the most common household type in the United States is persons living alone. A compilation of statistics published in an "Alternatives to Marriage" project in 2008 states, "27 million households consist of a person living alone, compared to 25 million households with a husband, a wife, and a child. . . . In 2006, new statistics from a large national sample show that the majority (50.3 percent) of adults are unmarried!"

According to the US Census Bureau, in 2002 about 20 million children lived in a household with only their mother or their father. This is more than one-fourth of all children in the United States. The most common type of single-parent family is one that consists of a mother and her biological children. In 2002, 23 percent of all children (16.5 million) were living with their single mother. Households headed by a single father increased after the early 1980's. In 1970, only one percent of children lived with a single father. In 2002, about five percent of children under age 18 lived with their single father.

Family Pressures

Families of all types are pummeled from various directions with all sorts of pressures. Even so, according to a Barna study done in 2006, more than half of those polled listed family as their most important priority.

Today economic woes cause stress for many families. The rising cost of basics such as gasoline and food strain family budgets. People

Core Bible Passages

Luke 2:41-52 depicts Jesus' home life and his parental care as a young boy. These verses picture the family traveling on a religious pilgrimage for Passover. On that occasion, Jesus' parents unintentionally left him behind in the synagogue. When they eventually found him, they chided him for upsetting them, although he felt that he should be talking to and questioning the religious leaders. Jesus is presented as being obedient to his family and to God.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 contains classic instructions for Hebrew parents. **Verse 4** is called "the Shema," and it expresses belief in the supremacy of God. These and other parts of God's commands were to be learned by heart, recited to the children, and discussed. The assumption was and still is that parents are closest to their children and their needs.

Among several of the Proverbs that deal with family responsibilities, **Proverbs 4:1-9** emphasizes the importance of the father's instructing his children about wisdom. The writer tells his children how his father instructed him.

In **2 Timothy 1:5**, Paul indicated how significant the teachings of Timothy's mother and grandmother were to his faith and life. Encouragement by adult family members can have a lasting effect on the lives of children throughout their adult years.

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who have been laid off wonder if or when their savings will run out—if they are fortunate enough even to have savings. The cost of health care increases every year.

Death and divorce damage families, and such loss can lead to severe depression or destructive behavior. Having to adjust to new environments and new relationships can take its toll. Many who experience divorce or the loss of a spouse by death remarry and create “blended families.” The adjustments associated with blending two families with different histories and traditions can create great stress. For years, we have heard about the staggering divorce rate; but 2005 statistics show the divorce rate at 3.6—the lowest since 1970 and down from 4.2 in 2000. However, these same statistics tell us that the number of marriages has also dropped, even though the population continues to increase.

Work can create pressures for families. Juggling schedules in order to care for children and spend quality time with them can be a huge challenge. Yet, researchers have found that married and single parents spend more time teaching, playing with, and caring for their children than parents did 40 years ago. For married mothers, the time spent on childcare activities increased to an average of 12.9 hours a week in 2000, up from 10.6 hours in 1965. For married fathers, the time spent on childcare more than doubled, to 6.5 hours a week, up from 2.6 hours. Single mothers reported spending 11.8 hours a week on childcare, up from 7.5 hours in 1965.

The higher standard of living we relish almost always demands more income, and often that means a second or third job. Thus, childcare is necessary and can cost from \$4,000 to \$10,000 per year, depending on where one lives and how many children one has. These figures also apply to parents who are single due to divorce or death of a partner or to single parents who have adopted children.

Michigan State University has published a study entitled “Furthering Families.” Findings from the study identified five roles that are necessary for a healthy family: “providing resources, nurturing and support, life skill development, maintenance and management of the family system, and gratification of marital partners.” Anyone in the family can assume one or more of these roles.

Scriptures and Family Life

Jesus repeats in **Matthew 19:5** part of the Creation story found in **Genesis 2:24**, which describes how a man and his wife leave home and become as one flesh. We often refer to **1 Corinthians 13** as the epitome of love. The Bible, however, also shows us many examples of flawed families that were far from the Ozzie-and-Harriet ideal.

Biblical stories abound about family members involved in rape, incest, lying, stealing, murder, betrayal, and prostitution. Yet in the midst of all their mistakes, God repeatedly offered unaccountable grace, receiving and using these flawed members of God’s household. In addition, the Bible uses family imagery to describe relationship with God. In **Matthew 12:50**, Jesus said, “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother,” offering us a broader interpretation of “family”

Families Throughout History

Writing in *The Living Pulpit*, Justo L. González looks at the impact of the family throughout history. He begins by acknowledging that early Christian families had what we now call “family values,” but those values went against those of reigning Rome.

The church helped elevate the status and involvement of children and women in church society. Until then, babies were often left to die for various reasons. Roman society of the early church allowed a male of the family to determine whether a child lived. Also, within both Hebrew and Roman society, women had little or no rights and could not have any property of their own.

González writes that “Christianity changed all of that by proclaiming the value of all persons, by insisting on marital fidelity, and by supporting and encouraging women converts.” Studies bear out that the birth rate was higher among Christians than among society as a whole.

Yet from Rome’s point of view, Christians undermined “family values.” The government lamented the fact that women were following a religion different from their husbands’. Christians thus challenged the status quo of society’s standards. The author points out that the church “provided an alternative family, the family of God—or in more traditional translations, the ‘household of God.’”

González suggests Western Christians should question some of the presuppositions of what we today call “family.”

through his eyes. Perhaps we are not to imitate biblical family life as much as we are to follow God's commands for our lives—individually and collectively.

The Family of God

A church in Nashville has a sign that reads “The Family of God.” Is this presumptuous, or are they really able to be a family for those who especially need one? **Ephesians 2:19** refers to the “household of God,” and **Galatians 6:10** talks about “the family of faith.”

I once heard a story about a youth who told his pastor that he had just turned 15 years old that particular day. The pastor said, “I’ll bet you’ll have a great birthday party when you get home.” The boy replied, “No one in my family has ever celebrated that I was born.” That evening, the youth group went to the boy’s house and gave him a gift—the gift of themselves. In that moment, an arm of Christ’s church was that boy’s family.

The family is the showcase for parental love. Church members can also show that love. Ideally, the family provides an atmosphere in which children can grow and mature. Church ministries can assist parents and children alike in their spiritual maturation.

Many persons—single, married, with or without children—desire a sanctuary and a haven of peace and silence. They also need to be received and listened to. The church at its best can be God’s household for God’s people by listening to their human hurts and hopes.

United Methodist Stances

General Conference asks churches to strengthen their ministries and advocacy efforts to support children and their families. Churches need to work with service agencies that are serving children and families, and they must cooperate with other churches to address public policy concerns.

Churches must also recognize a variety of family configurations. Grandparents often function as parents. Families are headed by single parents. Families are blended through divorce and remarriage. “Adoption, fostering, and extended family structures are among those that need the church’s ministry” (“Putting Children and Their Families First,” *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2004*; page 134).

Churches need to consider support groups, hotlines, shelters, parenting classes, treatment programs, home-care services, nutrition and feeding programs, and other similar programs for persons both inside and outside the church. Too often churches easily offer services to persons in the community without realizing persons within the church sometimes have those same needs. No one is exempt from crises (*Book of Resolutions*, page 134).

Churches must realize that more parents of both genders and all classes of society are entering the work force or retooling themselves because of job interruptions. The number of children who live in households with only a single parent continues to increase. Churches need to intervene when there is evidence of neglect or abuse. Churches need to be aware of special-needs children who require closer attention and provide respite care for parents (“Childcare and the Church,” *Book of Resolutions*; pages 193–94).

Parents and Their Children’s Spirituality

George Barna, researcher of Christian beliefs and activities, found that parents believe they are primarily responsible for their children’s spiritual development. But even though parents state that belief, few talk regularly with their children about spiritual matters. Barna stressed that parents need more than just platitudes and admonitions about their task. Instead, churches must provide exercises and helpful suggestions on how they can carry out this duty.

Part of the survey showed that 96 percent of all parents of children under the age of 13 say they have the responsibility to teach their children in spiritual matters, yet research shows that a majority of parents do not spend any time during the week discussing religious matters with their children.

Contrary to what many say, parents rely almost totally on churches to provide this religious and spiritual dimension in their children’s lives and faith. They are not unwilling; they simply feel ill-equipped. Even though churches offer classes and activities for children and youth, they offer little help to equip parents for the role they say is a priority for them.

Barna has also found that another reason parents cannot guide their children in this arena is because they themselves are struggling with their own faith development. This area is a rich mission field for caring churches.

State of the Family

How can individual Christians and churches help nurture families?

CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your group members and your group time, choose from among the OPEN, CONTINUE, and CLOSE activities or from “Teaching Alternatives” to plan this session.

OPEN With Worship

A. Have a Call to Worship

LEADER: Come, worship!
God calls us to face the world with hope.

GROUP: We want to face the world with hope; but sometimes we are too weary or too fearful or too sad to feel hope.

LEADER: Come, worship!
God offers compassion and comfort and rest.

GROUP: We see those gifts from God. Help us find them today.

LEADER: Come, worship! God calls us as a people to live in hope.

GROUP: We claim God’s promises and embrace hope for us and our families. Praise be to God!

B. Sing a Hymn

Sing or read “Help Us Accept Each Other” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 560).

Ask: What does it mean, “We struggle to be human / and search for hope and faith”? (stanza 3). In what ways can God’s “acceptance change us”? (stanza 3). Why do we need “new eyes for seeing, / new hands for holding on”? (stanza 4).

CONTINUE by Exploring

C. Work an Acrostic

Down the left side of a large sheet of paper, vertically write the letters “F-A-M-I-L-Y.” Invite the group to brainstorm adjectives describing the family, beginning with each of the letters. For instance, “F” could be “fun” or “frustrating.” After spending several moments working the acrostic, use the same letters to describe various pressures that are placed on families. For example, “A” might be “adversity.”

D. Define Family

Read aloud “What Is a Family?” (pages 1–2). Reread the definition of *family* from The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church. Ask: What parts of this definition do you agree with? disagree with?

Form several small groups and invite each to develop a one-sentence definition of *family*. Ask them to write their definition and tape it to the wall. What common elements were among the definitions? What unique thoughts came from the groups’ definitions?

E. Compare Your Family With TV Families

The first paragraph of “The Ideal Family” (page 1) names several families that existed on television in the 1950’s. Write on a board the names “Stone” (Donna Reed), “Nelson” (Ozzie and Harriet), and “Clever” (Ward and June). Add names from later years “Petrie” (Rob and Laura), “Camden” (from *7th Heaven*), “Huxtable” (Bill Cosby and Phylicia Rashad), “Conner” (Roseanne Barr and John Goodman), “Lopez” (George Lopez family), and the “Simpsons.” Ask the group to name other families depicted on television.

In small groups, invite participants to discuss some of the characteristics of each of the family units. Ask: How are they different? alike? Ask members to determine which TV family is most like their own family. Why?

F. Talk About Types of Families

Review “What Is a Family?” (pages 1–2), giving special attention to the list of eight major types of families at the top of page 2.

Ask: What statistics in this section surprised you? Which ones did not? Look again at the eight categories of families and ask: Are there any listed here you had not thought of before? Would you add any more to this list? How does this list affect your understanding and definition of what a “traditional family” might be?

G. Consider Family Pressures

Read “Family Pressures” (pages 2–3). On a large sheet of paper list the pressures or stresses on many families today. Ask the group to add others they think of. Poll participants to determine the top three family pressures.

Next, form three small groups; assign each group one of the top three family pressures determined by the poll. Invite each group to discuss the following questions: Why does this factor affect families? How does it affect children and youth? What can family members do to deal effectively with this pressure? How can the local church congregation help families deal with this pressure? Report on the discussions in the large group.

H. Study the Family in Scripture

Ask a volunteer to read aloud “Scriptures and Family Life” (pages 3–4). Encourage the group to talk about positive and negative representations of family.

Read “Families Throughout History” (page 3) and ask: How do you respond to the statements by Justo González about the differences between Christian and Roman cultures?

Form four groups. Ask each group to deal with one of the “Core Bible Passages” (page 3). Ask: What does this passage say about God? about family life? about faith? about communication?

I. Discuss the Family of God

After silently reading “The Family of God,” “United Methodist Stances,” and “Parents and Their Children’s Spirituality” (all on page 4), brainstorm some ways your local church congregation is or could become “a household of God.” What characteristics does a church need in order to be considered “the family of God”? What ministries could you provide families? How could your church help parents talk with their children about faith?

J. Consider Proverbs

An often-heard proverb—attributed to an African culture or

to the Omaha Native American people—says, “It takes a whole village to raise a child.” A related Irish proverb states, “It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.” Discuss: How can these proverbs be applied to families and the church? What do they say about interrelationships and community?

CLOSE With Prayer

K. Pray

“Gracious God, who created the families of the earth, we commend to your care all the families of this FAITHLINK group, all the families of this congregation, all the families of this community, and all the families of this world. We pray that each home might be a home where hope gives light to life. We pray for those homes where there is danger, violence, fear, loneliness, hurtful words, and unceasing activity without reason. We pray for children, youth, and adults; for parents, step-parents, grandparents, and foster parents. We pray for couples and for persons who are alone. Be with us during the coming week as we live out our commitment to you and to one another. Amen.”

(Adapted from material prepared for National Family Week by the General Board of Discipleship)

Teaching Alternatives

- ◆ Invite a family counselor to discuss from his or her perspective the ways pressures affect today’s families.
- ◆ Bring magazines and newspapers to the session. Ask the group to find articles and pictures that deal with the state of the family in contemporary life. Make a collage to display in a prominent place in the church.
- ◆ Individually or collectively, write a poem or a song that deals with family living. Display in a hallway in the church building.

Next Week in FAITHLINK

Genetically Modified Foods

Controversy exists regarding the development and use of genetically modified foods. What issues emerge from this controversy? How can Christians find guidance in making decisions about genetically modified foods?