

# **Families today**

## **Fresh ideas on family issues**

### **The Keynote Presentation at the 2012 Synod**

#### **Introduction: Why have a keynote on families today?**

A family is something wonderful. Local church parishes are meeting-places for people who experience family life in a variety of ways - parents with their children, the young mother who is bringing up her child alone, the older widower, the same-sex couples, the extended family with many children, parents needing long-term care. They all deserve our respect.

Families deserve recognition and support. They stand by one another over time and across the generations. They need spaces and times of relief: they are part of our church.

This paper is meant to encourage discussion. It illuminates social and socio-political contexts and presents numbers and facts. It shows how the family has changed since biblical times. It describes how stable family life has always adapted to social changes.

Guidelines emerge, as we ask: What is conditioned by time? What lasts throughout the centuries?

In all, the paper wants to invite parish groups, congregations and church agencies to enter into dialogue with each other. It contains ideas on how church life and action can adjust to the various realities of family life. It encourages us to empower families in their everyday life and makes a contribution to the debate in society at large.

#### **Dealing with the keynote**

The executive board of the Evangelical Church of Westphalia requests its parishes and church districts, its institutions and agencies, to respond to this main presentation. Their position statements are requested by the Church Office of the Evangelical Church of Westphalia by July 1, 2013.

The Evangelical Church of Westphalia and the Church of Lippe, their parishes and agencies, undertake to examine whether, or not, their own work is friendly toward families, to focus more clearly on families and to encourage networking. It is very keen to read their reports.

The Evangelical Church of Westphalia and the Church of Lippe have asked them to develop ideas for activities in 2013, to describe their experience with projects and to feed them into the process. This process will be facilitated from 2013 by the website [www.familien-heute.de](http://www.familien-heute.de).

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“My grandma. She is already dead, but I always think about her while I am playing aggravation with my parents and my brother. Because she always played with me so beautifully.” ( Kira, 9)

“Since I became a widow my two children are what means most to me.” (Ulla, 33)

“My neighbor who does school work with Sven when I take a nap in the afternoon.” (Heiko, 28, a father who is a single parent)

“Unfortunately my mother-in-law too. She will never forgive me that I took away her son from her. But now she is in need of care. And we care for her. She is his mother, after all!” (Margot, 60)

“Simply everyone who belongs to the family tree. Our family reunion is always on the first weekend in June. There is something going on!” (Dieter, 45)

“My girl friend. Even if my parents don’t see it that way.” (Kevin, 16)

## Foreword

Five questions for Annette Kurschus, Präses of the Evangelical Church of Westphalia, and Dr. Martin Dutzmann, General Superintendent of the Church of Lippe

### **“Do you have a family?” How do you answer this question?**

Kurschus:

As the question is usually intended I would have to answer “No”. I am not married and I have no children of my own. But I answer “Yes” because I, of course, have family: I have parents, kin, godchildren and I am tied into a whole network of relationships in which we are there for one another.

Dutzmann:

I can answer in the usual sense with a resounding “Yes”. That is because I live with my wife and our three sons, the usual classical image of a family. But “father - mother - child”, that is only one form of family. Many other forms have emerged in the meantime. The “right” family probably doesn’t exist.

### **What do you think lies behind the question “Do you have a family?” when you are asked it?**

Kurschus:

What great interest people have in my family status became clear to me during my candidacy for the office of church president (*Präses*). Time and again people asked openly, or covertly: “How is she going to manage by herself? Doesn’t one need the support of a family in order to carry out such an important office?”

Dutzmann:

The “classical” form of family is also a topic of public interest. I hold two offices: That of the General Superintendent of the church in Lippe and that of the Protestant Bishop of the German military. It is astonishing how many well-meaning people ask me: “How can you carry out these offices simultaneously? Does your family really go along with this?”

### **Why do you think that the family as a whole has been brought into the focus of public interest?**

Dutzmann:

All surveys prove it: People long for a family. They are looking for successful examples, and want to know how different generations can live together in a way characterized by love, freedom, reliability and responsibility.

Kurschus:

There is indeed hardly another topic that involves all people so personally without exception, because every one has family - in whatever way. At the same time there is hardly another topic which is so marked by so many ideal perceptions, images and clichés.

**With this keynote presentation the Evangelical Church of Westphalia and the Church of Lippe want to encourage discussions and initiatives on the topic of family. Is there a Protestant perspective on the family?**

Dutzmann:

An expedition through the Bible on this is most interesting and to be recommended. It gives a picture of diversity, of confusion, of human failure and guilt within families. Here we find no ideal family, and certainly no 'holy family' – which, on the one hand, is sobering and, at the same time, a relief.

Kurschus:

For me, strengthening families in a Protestant perspective has to do with mercy and amazement, with support and care, with freedom and openness, with continuity and respect. It is about the question: How does the family that we experience in this or that way belong to God's great love story with human beings?

**Where do you see the particular challenge of the keynote?**

Dutzmann:

I am particularly interested in what clues we gain from the study of the relevant Bible texts. I hope that our synods will discuss this topic with profit for our churches and for our society.

Kurschus:

I am especially concerned about how we can honor and protect the "traditional family" with children, the "classical marriage" between man and woman without discriminating against other forms of partnership and living together in a family. How do we promote a positive consciousness of the diversity of ways of life and how can we contribute so that this diversity is experienced as blessing and happiness?

Our cordial thanks go to all those who have worked so hard to produce the texts presented here. We look forward very much to more joint activities in our churches.

Annette Kurschus

Dr. Martin Dutzmann

## **Perceiving families undergoing change**

### **Preliminary questions**

#### **What makes a family a family?**

What makes a family a family? When people talk about their family the three components relationship, decision and function are generally intermingled:

- The family tree clearly points out and establishes who belongs to the family and who does not. That is a fact that cannot be influenced and also has legal consequences, for example, in inheritance law and in a case of long-term care.
- Opting for a family also happens independently of the family of origin. People join together in marriage or in other forms too. Family life offers dependability in various forms and is supportive.
- The function of a family steps ever more into the foreground. It is about caring for one another in love and responsibility, giving one another security, bringing up children, sharing work, offering reliability and experiencing happiness.

The Protestant action committee on family questions (EAF) picks up the different points of view. Its family-policy guidelines from 2009 state:

“Social change leads time and again to the question of what can, and should, be viewed as family today. EAF presupposes a widened and open concept of family: it views as ‘family’ all forms of living together in which parents bear responsibility for children or children show concern for parents. The concept of family also includes unmarried couples and partners with a child, not necessarily of their own. It covers the one-parent family as well as step, patchwork or continuation families. The EAF also includes civil unions and inclusive communities through bonds of kinship in its concept of family. The Protestant church today appreciates the continuing wish for partnership and family visible in these diverse ways of life, rather than viewing them as models in competition with each other.”

Its goes on from this concept of family to emphasize its function:

“Family is where people stand by and bear responsibility for one another over the long term and across the generations.”

### **Issues in the public debate**

Child benefit, child-care benefit, parental leave, child day-care, the work-life balance, child protection, prevention and early support are key terms in current discussions. The work-life balance, i.e. combining a family and a job, relates initially to caring for children but increasingly to caring for relatives.

The discussions are enriched with - mostly unexpressed – ideas about the “right” family. Emotional historical images of the family play a role here. For example, the idea that family

life in the past was characterized by harmony and concord, while the contemporary family with its conflicts and problems presents a kind of deterioration.

## **Facts and figures**

### **Family forms are changing**

Families have changed considerably since the 1970s in their forms, relationship structures and daily routines. The numbers of the Federal Office of Statistics in Wiesbaden and the Data Report 2011 show that among families with children the family form “Married couple with children” is still the most frequent at 72 percent. “Patchwork families” also belong there. What are continuing to rise are, above all, the non-married committed partnerships that have almost doubled in the last twelve years. There is also a notable increase in those who are bringing up children alone. In 2010 it was 19 percent, and 12 years before it was 14 percent. Single parenthood is apparently a “matter for women”: in nine out of ten cases in 2009 the mother was the parent bringing up a child or children alone.

Family forms such as single parenthood, non-married and same-sex unions are increasing, as are weekend marriages, separate households and commuter relationships. The share of one-person households is increasing most strongly and was registered in 2009 across the Germany at 39.5 percent. With older women, the percentage of those living alone has risen quickly and strongly with increasing age. But living alone does not automatically mean that someone is lonesome and without social networks.

### **Challenge: mobile and multi-local**

The expectation that people are highly mobile in the working world is leading families to the limits of the bearable. Some have been seeing the danger of a “completely mobile single society”.

In the meantime the “multi-locality” of families has become an issue for sociology. The family lives in different cities and states. The distances change the communication behavior among them.

## **Trend: work-life balance**

The micro-census of 2010 in Germany investigated how mothers and fathers today establish a work-life balance in comparison with the 1990s. Here are some of the results:

- Mothers still limit their working life sooner than fathers: in 2010, 60 percent of mothers, but 84 percent of fathers with children under 18 were employed.
- The older the children, the higher the employment participation of mothers; with fathers the employment participation, by contrast, is mostly independent on the age of the children.
- Over against 1996 the share of mothers in employment is on the rise, while that of fathers is falling.
- More than two thirds (70 percent) of employed mothers in 2010 were working part-time. Compared to 1996, the part-time share of mothers - in eastern and western Germany - has risen steeply.
- In 2010 women life partners with children (45 percent) showed the highest full-time percentage, followed by single mothers (42 percent). Employed married women with children were only employed full-time in 25 percent of the cases.
- In the case of more than half (54 percent) the couples with children, both partners were working in 2010.
- When both partners are employed the full-time employment of the father in combination with the part-time employment of the mother is by far the most frequent work-time model.

Combining a family and a job is a special challenge for both men and women. It remains to be seen whether, and how, the different family, social and work-market policies of the recent past will sustainably influence the employment rate of mothers and fathers. But along with the promotional measures of the German government, the supply of family-friendly work-time models as well as personal attitudes will play a central role.

## Legal foundations and influences

Since the changes in childhood law in 1998 children born outside marriage have had the same status as other children in Germany. At the same time, family law strengthens the “social family” in that, for example, non-married fathers have care and visiting rights. In addition, joint custody after the divorce is the rule. This implies that more and more children do not grow up at only one central place: they have to become more mobile and commute back and forth from their parents who no longer live together.

In the family law of today there are constitutional guidelines and model images of marriage and family. Constitutional law places marriage and family under the special protection of the state in Article 6 of the German constitution.

The Federal Constitutional Court offers guidelines for the interpretation of “marriage” and “family” that have been incorporated into the family law of the Civil Code and made more concrete. Article 6 of the constitution (Basic Law) establishes a protective and defensive right against state intrusion and at the same time a state guarantee of marriage and family.

### Article 6 Constitutional law

- (1) Marriage and the family shall enjoy the special protection of the state.
- (2) The care and upbringing of children is the natural right of parents and a duty primarily incumbent upon them. The state shall watch over them in the performance of this duty.
- (3) Children may be separated from their families against the will of their parents or guardians only pursuant to a law, and only if the parents or guardians fail in their duties or the children are otherwise in danger of serious neglect.
- (4) Every mother shall be entitled to the protection and care of the community.
- (5) Children born outside of marriage shall be provided by legislation with the same opportunities for physical and mental development and for their position in society as are enjoyed by those born within marriage.

The law regarding civil unions regulates the life together of same-sex couples. It makes homosexual couples with reference to their rights and duties - like payment rights – equal to married couples before the law. For this reason the constitutional relationship of a civil union over against marriage is presently being discussed.

## **Conditions that influence the life of families**

### **Time**

The conditions for families have changed. What has not changed is the fact that families have a lot to accomplish. Every family builds a context in which it desires to live with responsibility, trust and reliability. Families bear the care for the successive generation. They take over responsibility for the generation that is getting older. Approximately 70 percent of those who need care are taken care of at home. The changing societal conditions demand various forms of adjustment in order to carry out reliable care for one another. Whether that is successful depends on many factors. Five basic factors are described in the following in their significance for families.

Every family constellation must find its way to establish a sense of community. Thereby the factor time plays a role. Children need reliable times to be with their parents. It is not necessarily important that they spend a lot of time with them, but it is very important that parents are reliably and regularly present, above all in the evenings and on the weekend. This is shown by the World Vision Child Study of 2007.

All family members need time for themselves. And, finally, families need time for other social networks. These needs stand over against various work, school and free time schedules.

The present family report of the Federal Ministry for family affairs, senior citizens, women and youth is entitled "Time for family" and it discusses family-time policies as an opportunity for a sustainable family policy.

#### **Federal family minister Dr. Kristina Schröder on the 8<sup>th</sup> family report:**

"Time is the lead currency of our family policy. Parents need time in order to accompany their children into life, and they need time when relatives need support or long-term care. From studies we know: the wish for more family-time ranks far above the wish for more money or for better child care. Whether families hold together, whether parents and children can be there for one another, is primarily a question of time."

In connection with this report an expert commission developed key points for a family-friendly policy of time. They concern points of conflict and the wishes of families in different phases and constellations. Some of these key points, that also concern church life, are quoted here:

- More time sovereignty of parents can be attained through the further construction of care facilities or through the adjustment of work time. However, the needs of the company cannot be completely ignored.
- Different time structures like the working times or opening times of care facilities are frequently not adjusted to one another. Such an adjustment can in most cases be best attained on a local level.
- The co-responsibility of older people should be more frequently addressed to gain their support for giving more family time.
- The German government's voluntary service can be used to a stronger extent as an instrument to promote the civil involvement of older people.
- Family-supporting service offerings can lighten the load on families and contribute to helping them to organize everyday life better. Existing infrastructure facilities such as multi-generation houses or child care facilities could be used as new-style referral centers and service centers.
- Communities should orient themselves - as should the whole of society - more intensely to the idea of a caring community. Local platforms that can promote and coordinate civil involvement may provide the basis for the emergence of such communities.

## Family images on television

Whether in family series like “Neighbors” or in help-TV as in “Super-Nanny”, families are a solid part of the program. Whatever takes place in real life as a special event - like an accident, unemployment or divorce - is for TV merely the start of a plot or the end of the film. Often television movies show family images in a setting of riches and luxury, suggesting that they belong to a happy family.

In help-TV quick solutions are presented, but in real life the solutions to problems are longer lasting, for example, upbringing problems or private insolvency. The media frequently show assignments of guilt.

Therefore an individualization of the problem takes place although the structural conditions or an illness, for example, being a messy, are the cause. Over against the quick fixes on television, one’s own problems appear more difficult. Compared to its fast-moving, eventful action, one’s own life soon seems to be “boring”.

“But real families have to live their own life. Here the church with its contributions can encourage us to live our own personal life.” That is the way TV critic Klaudia Wick puts her expectations of the church.

## Poverty and health

Across Germany almost every fifth child is poor or is at-risk of poverty. In North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) 800,000 children live in a low-income household. Poverty means more than just having fewer material resources. Socially disadvantaged families suffer all together under countless risks: too little school and vocational education, discontinued employment and high unemployment which encompasses generations as well as a number of chronic illnesses and social isolation.

With the increasing number of under-age children that are to be cared for in a household the poverty risk rises. For one thing the financial need of a household rises with every child, and on the other hand the time flexibility for the employment of the parents disappears because more children need more care.

Children of single parents have an above average poverty risk. In NRW more than 40 percent of the children of single parents live in a household short of income. But child poverty is certainly not only a problem for children of single parents. Almost three fourths of all the children affected by income poverty grow up in households of couples. The poverty risk of children depends substantially on the employment participation of the parents and their qualification. The full-time employment of only one parent is often not sufficient to preserve a family from income poverty.

In a large part of low-income households with children parents undertake considerable efforts to raise their children well. The public generally does not take much notice of this accomplishment. That sharpens the existing burdens and leads to exclusion. Poverty must not be mistaken for negligence.

A child who can develop powers of resiliency will get along better in life.

### **Definition: Resiliency**

Resiliency is a technical term for psychological resistance power. It is decisive for how good one deals with small and large crises. An important insight is that resiliency can be strengthened and improved, therefore trained.

### **The mother of resiliency**

The American developmental psychologist Emmy E. Werner is viewed as the mother of the resiliency theory. In 1955 she researched almost 700 children on the Hawaiian Island of Kauai to find out what risk factors disturbed the development of a child. She found that many developed very positively in spite of poor family and physical preconditions. She designates these children as resilient because they fare better with hard knocks than others.

Those who are permanently overtaxed become exhausted. They run the risk of neglecting their children. The danger grows when compounded by further problems that mothers and fathers are not able to overcome through their own power. For example, a difficult illness or another twist of fate arrives on the scene so that the family can no longer supply mutual care.

Poverty often leads to limited development chances for children and to an increased risk of illness. The connection between social situation and health is clear, according to the medical association of Westphalia-Lippe.

Socially disadvantaged children are less often sent to early diagnostic examinations and are seldom vaccinated. Other preventive measures, e.g. against alcohol abuse, are hard to implement. Child protection also means protection from different forms of disadvantage. Prevention programs must come into effect as soon as possible to enable children to grow up healthy. Preventive child protection is better than later crisis intervention.

Representatives of diaconal ministries emphasize promoting prevention, rather than cure. Simultaneously, however, such investment in prevention should not mean that programs for crisis solution are short-changed.

Experts frequently report a reduced communication behavior in families in risk situations. Children are regimented rather than praised. That means for children and adults in precarious life situations too: they seldom experience themselves as effective. That leads to feelings that they are worthless and life lacks meaning.

## **Exhaustion and experiences of violence**

The family is, on the one hand, a place of refuge but, on the other, it is also a place of violence. Frequently exhaustion and overburdening are the cause of conflicts. When conflicts in the family escalate, the most vulnerable suffer most. This leads to violence in the partnership, violence against children and also violence against helpless old people.

Inter-family violence experiences are proven to enhance the risk of a children becoming violent themselves in later life. New studies confirm that ever more children are brought up non-violently. It is controversial whether the rising number of separations and divorces also contribute to non-violence in families. On the one hand, it has become easier to separate oneself from a violent relationship. On the other, criminal statistics show that there is no significant decrease in domestic violence.

The extent of parental violence over against children is still significant. Since about 2005 significantly more children under six years have been brought into custody and placed in care homes or foster families. In 2008 there were 74 percent more in NRW than in 2005. The increasing interventions of the youth agencies are indeed more probably a result of a rising sensitivity and a change in reporting patterns.

### **Endangering child well-being and child protection**

“Child well-being” is a central concept in the context of family law on “parental care” and custody measures. Child well-being is a central legal norm and, at the same time, an indefinite concept that always has to be made real based on an individual case. It serves to legitimize intervention by government departments. They are concerned to prevent the threat to children in families and the family environment. That can be physical, sexual and emotional maltreatment and neglect. The constant spectacular cases necessitate the question: Why did no one intervene earlier?

## Combining care and employment

When men and women have to spend time earning their living this reduces their time for care of relatives and attentiveness to children. The spatial distance between the generations is often very large. Family generations live “multi-locally” in different households. At present there is a “sandwich generation” made up of those 40 to 65-year-olds who care for children as well as for family members in need of care. The sociologist Dr. Cornelia Kricheldorff describes care as a common life risk.

- Need for care in old age is an expected life risk for those over 80 years of age
- The probability is increasing that care and support are needed in a family group of two parallel generations
- The addressing the need for long-term care within the course of life is inescapable for the individual and for society
- Problems are looming in view of the decrease in the number of children and the simultaneous greater spatial mobility

This future prospect raises questions:

- What family supplements can be “purchased”? Is it just a matter of services such as cleaning and shopping, or it is about human beings and relationships - for example, with eastern European migrants offering home cleaning assistance, day care mothers or carer-companions?
- How can combining care and employment be more successful through the company and outside the company support, for example, through flexible work times and special adult education programs?
- Families achieve a lot in this regard. They need personal and societal support in order not to fall into exhaustion.

### **From the field of practice**

#### **Dementia Cafe**

The Dementia Cafe in Detmold is the open meeting place for dementia patients in the company of relatives. We want to give caring relatives bright ideas and support in accompanying people afflicted with dementia. Every meeting has its special topic. Sometimes this is only meant for the caring relatives. Then there is always an alternative for those afflicted with dementia. People are pleased to receive fresh ideas and put them into practice. All those concerned are cordially welcomed to a cozy coffee hour. If desired, there is someone to give individualized advice at every meeting. That is carried out by experienced social educators.

Families - in whatever form - need places that offer them sufficient respect and security for exchange and for forming networks. Churches can be such places. Politicians and society expect a lot from the church and its institutions. For this reason we must consider whether the family images that characterize church practice are still in accord with contemporary family life. What basic theological convictions determine the image of families?

## **Shaping family with responsibility in the freedom of faith**

The described societal developments challenge the Protestant church to support families and to offer them orientation. A look at biblical writings will help us here. The family relationships of the biblical writings are certainly different from those of today. Nevertheless, basic life themes underlying historical features have remained the same throughout the centuries.

### **The protective space of family in the Old Testament**

At first the change in various family forms in the Old Testament becomes obvious. The word “family” is not to be found in the Old Testament. But the Bible speaks about the “house of the father”. In the transition from family groups living nomadically to those who settled in agricultural groups, family is - according to contemporary understanding - always the extended family. It is not only the family of mothers and fathers with their children, but one that encompasses several generations. Along with those people who belong together through marriage or kinship there are always those who also belong to the household - including the female and male slaves.

In the agricultural culture they live and produce in the several houses that are grouped around the farmyard. This large family secures the economic survival of everyone. It offers protection against external invasion.

The historical distance between the family forms of biblical times and our contemporary conceptions becomes apparent. Especially the personal selection of a partner and the freedom to organize one’s own life are absent for most of those who belong to the household. In viewing the family narratives of Genesis we realize that the experiences and feelings described are nevertheless similar to those of the “patchwork life” of today and the challenges with which we are confronted:

- The Joseph narrative reports on the unequal treatment of the sons by the father and the competition among the brothers that explodes violently.
- Theologically significant are the narratives about unfulfilled wishes for a child and the ensuing burden on the relationship between wife and husband. That is clear from the narratives of Sarah and Abraham, and Rachel and Jacob.
- It is also part of the everyday realism of the Bible that it tells of violence in families, e.g. the quarrel between the brothers Cain and Abel that ends with the murder of Abel. David commits husband murder in order to get a coveted woman for himself. Cases of rape in the family are also reported. Children and slaves are dependents that can also be sold.

At the same time, concepts emerge in the Old Testament that go far beyond everyday experiences and become images of hope: God is associated with the image of a mother who consoles and nourishes and thus stands by God's people as God's child in unconditional love and faithfulness.

### **Family in the Ten Commandments**

The Ten Commandments start with God pointing to the liberation from slavery and oppression in Egypt. They help to shape and preserve the gift of freedom. God's liberating deed contrasts with the actions of human beings. If we view the command not to murder as the central one, then it can be established that both commandments framing it involve the family. "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." And: "You shall not commit adultery."

The family is a necessary space for human life. A life without family is de facto not possible. At that time old people, widows and orphans were especially at risk. Many texts let it be known that it was the older parents who succumbed first, in the internal family distribution struggles. Old parents are to be honored. It is about giving weight to those who cannot preserve and assert their dignity alone. The command forbidding adultery it is about the possible rupture in the life together of husband and wife and therewith the breaking up of the space in which children can grow up and be protected.

Widows and orphans who do not live in families are placed under God's special protection.

The fourth and the sixth commandment formulate the protective function of the family: they are aimed at giving "becoming" and the "passing" life a reliable space for development and for support. (The numbering of the commandments used here follows the Lutheran tradition. Please note that, in the Reformed tradition, the parent commandment is number 5 and the commandment forbidding adultery is number 7.)

*“Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge.”*

*(Ruth 1:16)*

This promise of loyalty is today a favorite wedding passage. Ruth gives this promise to her mother-in-law Naomi. It has always involved the wish to live in commitment, reliability and responsibility.

Ruth and her mother-in-law find a common way out of a hopeless social situation. Naomi and her husband immigrated to Moab because of a famine. Her husband died shortly thereafter. Her sons married Moabite women. After Naomi's sons also died Ruth decided to stay with her and to return with her to Israel, although she had to expect to be considered a foreigner and to suffer discrimination. In Boaz they both find someone who redeems their inheritance, and Ruth and Boaz get married. Together they go down the path in which Ruth can remain true to her promise to Naomi and take Naomi along into the house of her husband. The story shows that only realistic possibility of the social integration of two childless widows is into a society in which the necessary material resources for life are bound to male inheritance and possession. In the core of this narrative stands a promise that makes a new view of family expressly possible. The promised loyalty behind the legal and traditional forms shows up as the foundation of family community.

## Relatives and the parish as family in the New Testament

In the New Testament we again find the concept of the household as a family form embracing dependent persons, along with relatives and in-laws. The relationship of Jesus to his own family is described in the older tradition as very ambivalent:

- His relatives think he is insane (Mark 3:21)
- Jesus himself rejects the claims of his family (Mark 3:31-35; Matthew 12:46-50)
- In the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark and Luke Jesus many times tells his disciples to leave their family and home and to follow him. The fellowship of those who gather in discipleship becomes a new family. Children and widows thereby enjoy Jesus' special respect and care: in the reception of Old Testament tradition they become special examples of faith in God. They are no longer simply those who are in need of protection; they themselves are active.

Also the Letter to the Galatians is critical of existing social structures: the social institutions are dissolved to the advantage of a new loyalty in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:28).

In the Pauline letters we likewise witness how people who live in a family as dependents (especially slaves) are admitted to baptism as individual persons. This freedom of faith founds the congregation as the fellowship in which the dividing differences are abrogated.

The household codes in the New Testament letters (Colossians 3:18-4:1; Ephesians 5:22-6:9) became particularly significant in the Christian tradition: They address the mutual responsibility of everyone who belongs to the household, above all of the fathers as head of the household. The household codes tradition was freely taken from the environment of Christianity and was also a sign of assimilation to the standard ethics at that time. At the same time they ward off questions whether the access to faith and the fellowship that is opened up to all who are baptized does not dissolve the traditional family forms.

In this way both stand next to each other in the New Testament: the call to break out of the bonds of the family groups for the sake of discipleship and the new fellowship in the congregation, and on the other hand the strengthening of traditional family structures.

## Reflections from Systematic Theology

The biblical source allows for several fundamental statements on the function of family.

### 1.

Family can be understood as God's invitation to life and to shape responsibility, commitment and reliability. This function of family is derived from the concepts of loyalty and reliability as God's dealing with creation and with the people of God. It is God who goes with them and gives them rules to stand the test of life. God's loyalty is the ground of human loyalty.

The rules of life in the commandments name exactly these functions. Human loyalty and reliability are to offer "becoming" and "passing" life a space of protection.

There are no given institutional forms, certainly not a sacramental definition. Rather the point is to fulfill these fundamental functions in the various forms that are lived today. The New Testament expands the sociological concept of family beyond that in the sense of a fellowship of faith. It indeed increases the worth of "those who need protection" in that it assigns special dignity and competence to children, widows and orphans in the beatitudes of Matthew's Gospel.

Paul sees all sociological categories of living together as relative. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28). Therein lies the vision of a new fellowship, the differences are bridged over, domination and subordination are dissolved and a new togetherness is made possible. The aim is to live the substantial functions in freedom and responsibility.

### 2.

Since human beings are created in the image of God they are made as "man and woman", "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God He created them; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27) As women and men who are actively shaping creation and enjoying restfulness, as God himself did, human beings are the image of God. Being in the image of God becomes visible in the relationship of human beings to one another, in the children in whom new life comes into the world and in helping to shape God's creation. Being in the image of God is bound to the commission to pass on life and to protect its individuality.

The partnership between woman and man is not bound to definite sociological forms. In it the substantial functions are also to be fulfilled. The “commandment forbidding divorce” is not to be understood in absolute terms. It can be secondary to fulfilling the substantive functions. Likewise, the polarity between man and woman can in the diversity of individuals be “replaced” through other forms of fellowship.

### **The commandment forbidding divorce from a Protestant perspective**

The recommendation of the Evangelical Church in Germany on the relationship between civil and church marriage contains a helpful interpretation of Jesus’ commandment forbidding divorce. “According to the Reformation understanding, biblical statements on the fellowship of human beings are to be considered in their diversity and measured by their nearness to the message of the reconciliation of the world in Christ and the justification of human beings by God through Jesus Christ. The biblical assertions about marriage and the concluding of marriage and divorce must be directed from and to the central message, which from the Protestant standpoint is, at the same time, radical and sober in the knowledge of the limits of human ways of life and fellowship and of the constant need for reconciliation and new beginning. Where agreement can be perceived they can be utilized; where individual assertions or even prescriptions and admonitions contradict this central message according to present understanding they must be cautiously corrected. It certainly belongs to this caution, too, that the undeniable sharpness of, for example, the commandment forbidding divorce in Matthew (chapter 19) is to be read as a critical challenge the lifestyles we see around us that almost seem completely individual and arbitrary, when it advocates a union between man and woman aiming for constancy and reliability. This commandment forbidding divorce should, and indeed, must find its limitation in the message of the love, care and willingness of God to forgive human beings who constantly fail to make it.”

(“Soll es künftig kirchlich geschlossene Ehen geben, die nicht zugleich Ehen im bürgerlich-rechtlichen Sinne sind? Zum evangelischen Verständnis von Ehe und Eheschließung, eine gutachtliche Äußerung“:

(Should there be marriages that are conducted in church and are not at the same time marriages in a civil sense? On the Protestant understanding of marriage and the conclusion of marriage, an expert assessment)

*(EKD texts 191, p. 13, only in German, 2009)*

### **3.**

Partnership and family are meant to produce “descendants”. After the creation of the human being in the image of God the first creation report adds: “God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’” (Genesis 1:28).

To have children is an expression of the blessing of God that desires happiness and fulfillment of life. Blessing is passed on to the descendants. Child-friendliness means being open to the blessing of God.

### **The future of children is the future of creation**

Against this backdrop, the demographic development in Germany and Europe raises questions. Why are fewer children being born? Here are some possible reasons:

- the economic burdens that children place upon their parents
- a fundamentally pessimistic outlook
- feared restrictions in lifestyle
- a social climate unfriendly to children

Which ever way you look at it, the issue at stake is always about affirming the future and being willing to keep life chances open for future generations and so to accept restrictions now. The future of children is always about the future of creation as well.

#### **4.**

Passing on experiences of faith and the tradition of faith is an essential function of family in the biblical view. A central text in the Bible is connected with the command to pass the faith on to children:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.”  
(Deuteronomy 6:4-7)

Passing on the tradition of faith in the family, especially on feast days, is a central element of the life of faith in Judaism. Life is passed on where God’s instructions are passed on.

Passing on life and passing on blessing takes place in the passing on of faith. That is valid for everyday religious practice, for religious upbringing and for the shaping of a living parish and an inviting church. Our view of families is expanded by the idea of passing on the faith. Family is also the place where God’s word is passed on and lived. Faith places us in a new community, and the community of the faithful pass on the faith.

## **Challenges to church practice and the Protestant understanding of family**

The Protestant understanding of family, and church practice with families, is challenged in Germany through the following situations.

### **For discussion:**

#### **What is 'family' here?**

A church parish sends out invitations to a one-week family retreat. Kindergarten parents are the main ones to show interest. The following have signed up:

- two couples with a child
- four couples with two children
- one couple with three children, ten-year-old Mia has Down's syndrome
- one couple with four children
- Marlies and Petra, whose rainbow family includes young Kevin from Petra's first marriage
- Jürgen and Marita with their four-year-old twins and the grandfather with slight dementia

Who can go along? No single parent with her children has shown interest, nor has the young widower who is bringing up four-year-old Justina with his mother-in-law. Weren't they asked or did they not feel interested?

How is it in your church parish? Is the above list of participants typical of a family retreat? If not, why not? What should you do to change that?

### **Observation**

Fundamental attitudes towards marriage and family influence everyone - consciously as well as subconsciously. Any of the fundamental positions (see "Discussion" below) on marriage and family taken by the leadership of a parish will affect the offerings in congregational activity. The image of the family a member of the parish has, or suspects, of his or her church parish will decide whether or not the member is interested in the program on offer.

- The number of one-person households is increasing and today constitutes a large share of society.
- The assessment of same-sex unions has also changed in church life.
- Childlessness is on the increase, also as a conscious decision.
- The solidarity between old and young has increased sooner in the families. Nevertheless, many people fear loneliness in old age because of the demographic situation. The situation of people without children is a special challenge in old age.

**For discussion:**

**Who is my family?**

Erna had a large family but no children of her own. She was an active member of the Ladies Aid and lived the last five years of her life in a retirement home. Up to the end she was regularly visited by her Ladies Aid sisters. When Erna died shortly before her 99<sup>th</sup> birthday her savings were used up. A funeral insurance policy did not exist. The social welfare office could find no relatives that felt responsible for the funeral. Hence it planned an anonymous urn burial without a funeral service at the community cemetery.

The chair of the Ladies Air is shocked. She looks up the pastor and directs a request to the presbytery of her church parish to bury Erna in a lawn grave at the Protestant cemetery and to hold a burial service beforehand in the church. The chair of the Ladies Air thinks that the fellowship of Christians must here substitute for the physical family.

How do you look at this?

There are two aims in the discussions and the practice of the Protestant church that accept this change. One is to encounter people without bias and to make participation in church life possible for them in the specific form in which they live family. The other is to describe commitment, reliability and responsibility as the expression of living faith and of grounding this theologically. The effort to do justice to both aims leads to heated debates. Out of concern for negative evaluation we note a certain reluctance to further describe the considerations derived from systematic theology as important and valid.

Two basic positions come to the fore. The core question is defining the relation between marriage and family.

The one position understands the family on the basis of the Protestant understanding of marriage. It emphasizes the high value that marriage has in the view of the Protestant church. Marriage is accordingly an ordinance and mandate of God or a parable of the covenant concluded between God and human beings. The focus is on the special state of marriage, which is meant to express loyalty, lived respect, considerateness and trustworthiness. The basic motif should also be expressed in the Protestant understanding of marriage. That is also valid when marriage is not (yet) the center of the family, or no longer is.

The other position attempts to understand family, marriage and partnership on the basis of the contents. It proceeds from a functional description of family. The related ways of life are secondary. Family is constituted through human beings who reliably stand by one another and assume responsibility. From this angle, God's blessing is on people who "found" and shape a family. Partnership, parenthood, responsibility for older persons can find expression in various ways. Commitment, reliability and responsibility can accordingly be lived in different, equally acceptable ways.

Debates on defining the relation between marriage and family are carried out in the Protestant church with intense involvement and internal participation. Our own family traditions and connections play a huge role here. The topic is closely bound up with personal ideas of faith and with our own life of faith and, precisely for that reason, is not only a private matter.

The debates indicate that this topic is about fundamental societal guidelines. Does the family have to adapt to the rhythm of the forces of liberal economics, or is it possible to think about and to shape the flexibility of a company to fit the family? How are the limits justified and defined so that people have the time to take on family responsibility? As a rule, families must find a compromise between economic requirements and responsibility for one another. In order for them to find orientation and support between the major themes of economic success and social responsibility, we need such debates about the value and goals involving the family. What do families need - in their diversity - so that people feel at home in this society and society remains worth living in?

## **Accompaniment of families through the church**

How can we accompany and support the various ways of life in which love, loyalty and constant personal responsibility are lived? This remains a challenge for the Protestant churches in Westphalia and Lippe. In pastoral care and official rites, in child care centers, as well as in religious education, families are accompanied by the church parishes and the church agencies in turning points of life. Children, youth, people in mid-life and older folk live in family relationships. If we succeed in bringing these family relationships into the practice of the church and congregation more sharply into view then we will feel still more of the vitality of blessing. Then the fellowship of the faithful can be experienced as the family of God.

Families in their diversity are to be strengthened, but they also are to be supported in the challenges and dangers in the spirit of justification. Many a hope, effort and expectation remain unfulfilled in connection with family. The conditions of the “unredeemed world” are also felt in present attempts to shape love, reliability and commitment. The conditions involve the constraints of scarce resources, the complicity in societal power relationships and the tendency to make human relationships a means to an end. Under these preconditions, family life can become a “constant effort”. This is where the assurance of justification particularly applies to families, as it relieves them of the compulsion themselves create a successful life.

Last but not least, the aspect of passing on the faith has its setting (*Sitz im Leben*) in the action of the church. It is about giving an important place to families in their different forms. The blessing of God is forward-looking. The fruitful, strengthening and nurturing power of blessing is related to all our talents. The blessing of God is a source of power for love, commitment, reliability and mutual responsibility for one another.

## The half of happiness

A short time ago I sat in an InterCity Express train alongside a family of four. Father, mother, a girl of about 5-year-old girl and an infant, four, perhaps five weeks old. The trip lasted for several hours. I don't know. Was it because of the boring periodical or because I hadn't seen a newborn for so long, but the family fascinated me.

Yet there was nothing idyllic about it. Both parents were totally overtired. I saw this at first glance. The five-year-old was not exactly in top form, either. She had to be put in her place again and again. Dad and Mom had neither the energy nor the time to play cards with her without end or to read to her. Once he would cradle the baby so it could sleep and then it was the opposite. And then there were also other passengers in the train. Friendly interested looks could suddenly change into frowning faces when the infant thought of squawking for longer than two minutes. No, you could certainly not talk about a cozy family train ride. The four of them were just able to get by.

For heaven's sake, I thought. There nobody is getting full value. Most likely perhaps the infant, but the five-year-old already has slow down and restrict herself, not to mention Dad and Mom. Nevertheless: there was, almost indescribably, a breath of blessing over this careful togetherness on the brink of exhaustion. I naturally recognized myself again and also the many others who, in mid-life, occasionally worse than better, try to cope with everything: family and friends, partnership, work and then also their own hobbies and interests. This can't be right: the everyday life of adults. So much effort, so many duties, is that what it is all supposed to be about? I wrote sentences like that in my diary when I was seventeen and occasionally they come back to me today.

"One is always a half-good father, a half-good teacher, a half-happy human being," writes Fulbert Steffensky, at one time a monk, then a professor, husband and father. "It has not been promised that human beings prepare for themselves a heaven on earth. But we can be bread to ourselves, occasionally black bread, occasionally white bread. We can occasionally be water for each other, occasionally wine."

Really, when we are half-successful at something, that can often be a lot. God stands for the whole, for the perfect.

I don't have to make it as the perfect wife, mother, friend, colleague – I only put this pressure on myself.

God stands for the whole, the perfect. Does God stand by? Sometimes I suspect it. Sometimes I feel it.

Like recently in the train.

*Antje Rösener*

*Arbeitshilfe zum Weitergeben (a resource to pass on) 2/2012*

## **Strengthening families in church and society**

Families accomplish a lot. Even with the societal changes in their forms and their internal relationship patterns they remain the most important constant network: the realm of primary care, protection and development. In them knowledge is passed on, traditions are lived and formed, cultural experiences are gained, values are transmitted. Strong families form the foundation of an efficient civil society and a lively church. Through economic pressure, societal individualization and marginalization mechanisms such as media influences families have moved into the focus of political and church activity. It has become increasingly clear that families need fostering and support so that they can vitally shape their everyday life. What church and society can contribute concretely is the topic of this chapter.

### **Starting again with children**

With the Year of Baptism (2012) the Westphalian church - as with the project "Starting again with children" – aimed to ensure that faith is passed on to the next generation. Many parishes and church districts were inspired through this to further develop their work with families. Especially through the preparation and planning of baptismal festivals, as well as projects and activities centered around the topic of baptism, the church gained an insight into the life situations of contemporary families.

- Single parents and patchwork families took part in baptismal festivals in large numbers. For economic, social and cultural reasons the "single parent" and "patchwork" families have so far been under-represented in baptism.

### **Observation: Baptism and money**

Children in low-income families are brought for baptism less often than children in middle and high income groups. This signifies that poorer families are concerned about whether or not they can bear the costs connected to baptism. It is ultimately a question of arranging the associated festivities, about proper clothing, settings and decorations.

But in financial emergencies other problems are frequently added: It is a cause for shame if you have to declare your income in order to obtain an allowance for a baptismal celebration. It is difficult to admit to yourself or others that you cannot afford it. Families with precarious income conditions suffer marginalization every day and this continues in church, and when it comes to baptism, confirmation and marriage. Indeed, they might well be amplified in the middle-class context of the church parish. This totally contradicts the essence of baptism and spreading the Gospel especially to poor and disadvantaged persons.

For this reason, parishes should be energetic and yet sensitive in their efforts to lessen material need and to avoid embarrassment and stigmatization. Baptism must be understood and upheld as an example of successful participation and a symbol of new beginnings.

- Most families are open to and interested in baptism. The parish must look for contact with them and together look for ways of matching the form of baptism with the life reality, values and cultural characteristics of these families.
- The Sinus Milieu Studies show that churches have a concentration of certain family forms that appear ever more seldom outside church environment. Sociologists therefore speak of a restricted social spread among church members.

Parish programs reach the educated class, for example, through the Christmas concerts with music by J. S. Bach and the conservative or traditional groups in organizations like the Ladies Aid and the men's club. The middle classes are addressed in child-care centers, BBQs, family worship services and excursions, as well as in child and youth work. The church reaches the precarious milieu with modest accommodation, occasional work and unstable family relationships only through its diaconal welfare ministries.

The church practically never reaches the milieus of the young and flipped-out, and the elite.

## **I will do it!**

“How did I ever get into this?” That is what Manni asks himself and tries to button up the middle button of the jacket of his good blue suit. He manages – only just! “Oh yes, after a big meal that is not easy. And on the way to the baptismal font I will pull in my tummy a bit; it is not for long.” Manni has solved the problem with the suit. What causes him a further headache is the fact that he has taken over a sponsorship on Sunday. It is certainly not the first time that he becomes a sponsor (god-parent), only that this time is somewhat troublesome. It is about the child of his neighbor. When he helped her carry the baby carriage up the steps two weeks ago she had tears in her eyes. And because Manni simply has a good heart he asked: “What is the matter?” And his neighbor broke out crying: “The pastor won’t baptize Finn because I don’t have a sponsor. But no one will do it for Finn and me!” Oh! What he knows about his neighbor shoots through Manni’s head: just twenty, her father dead, her mother with her lover on Mallorca, a boyfriend who loved her passionately at first, then got her pregnant and disappeared. Never visited by girlfriends, lost her job when the company went bankrupt. Manni breathes deeply, looks at sleeping Finn and hears himself saying: “Yes, you’ve got me!” And there he now stands in his tight blue suit and says to himself: “Yes, I will do it! Finn should have a chance, and that not only on paper!”

*Christa A. Thiel*

*The literary figure Manni in the series “Ver-rücktes” (crazy things) takes up experiences in his church and works them through in his own way.*

## The art of networking

Work with young families has been intensified in many parishes and church districts in the last few years but also in the special services of the provincial churches.

- Family education workers are increasingly going out to find young families, and especially young fathers, thereby reaching milieus that have often been less visible to these service agencies because of their come-structure.
- Parish and diaconal programs address families much earlier, for example, with welcome visits for families that have had a baby.
- New models of sponsorship - like reading sponsors - give answers to the changes in modern family structures. Especially designed for single parents and families whose grandparents live far away, these offers provide new reliable relationships and support achievements.
- A special chance lies in the expanding of intergenerational programs: old for young - young for old. The older ones give coaching on starting a job; the younger ones offer computer courses for senior citizens. There are offerings for all age groups. Multi-generation houses and family centers, but also youth and parish activities, are places for brainstorming on such projects.
- Work with children and young people is changing. Up until a few years ago behavioral abnormalities were frequently not noticed until they reached school age. There is now much earlier awareness and intervention.
- The massive build-up of crèches, nursery school places, counseling and educational facilities, such as the further development of family centers, are currently impacting hugely on church day-care centers for children in Germany.

## Linking up in networks

All the towns and cities in North Rhine-Westphalia offer a wide range of service and support facilities for families, from health provision to child-care centers and family education to all-day schools (still not standard in Germany). Even when they still have a partial or significant need for extension and development, fundamental support for families is certainly guaranteed on the existing basis. In view of the complicated legal and financial structure of these services, however, families often perceive them as operating in isolation and not as part of a whole.

The same applies to the services provided by the church and diaconal agencies. Those who use them perceive them as existing side-by-side, without much connection between the offerings. The result is, for example, that families encounter the church time and again in the parishes, in family education, child-care facilities or all-day school without perceiving all these spheres as being in a holistic connection as church. The question is therefore whether, and how, the large network of church and diaconal programs can become a network for families in which they experience 'church' in all these points of contact. This question goes to all the actors in the network:

- How can **congregations** more intensely widen their view to encompass all those actors and organizations that are also church? Do the actors succeed in getting to know one another and supplementing each other mutually?
- How can the **specialist services** go beyond their expertise to play a more active role as church networkers?
- How can **families** best profit from the diversity of church programs?

## **Example**

### **Network family center**

The church cannot offer families all that they need, nor should it. It is precisely in the areas of diaconal ministry that the networks frequently go far beyond what the church offers. The family centers present a perfect example. In the area covered by the Westphalian church there are already more than 250 (and in the area of the Church of Lippe there are 23) Protestant family centers that organize encounter, education and counseling for families and build bridges in the community. In neighborhoods and multi-cultural city areas the services offered by family centers go far beyond the church milieu. There are language and cooking courses, free-time programs for families, sport, social contacts and much more, organized jointly with local partners and other charitable organizations from the city area. In residential areas with fewer traditional clubs and community activities such cooperative approaches offer families the context for the building up of new communities. As a partner in networks that include different sponsors the church can establish contact with people who are foreign to traditional parish milieus. In this way it can enable them to enter the church community for a time through doing things together in different courses and other programs and projects.

When a couple is expecting a child they face many questions; some of which relate to their own city area or local church community. They look for different “homes”:

- Where is there a birth preparation group?
- Where can they find counseling and family education?
- What are there programs for leisure and encounter for families with small children?
- Where is there a good child-care center?

All this is selected with care, especially in urban spaces. People no longer grow into stable structures as a matter of course. This also applies to church and religious programs. Many young families are very open to, and desirous of spiritual accompaniment, fellowship with the like-minded and opportunities for religious education. The quality of service ranks higher than the criterion of how close it is to their home. Belonging to a specific parish or a denomination plays a secondary role.

## **Starting again with families**

Many church offerings continue to be directed at the “classical” forms of family and do not take sufficient account of diversity. That is the result of the present research project of the Social Sciences Institute of the Evangelical Church in Germany. It maintains that much can be improved in the networking of parish, regional and diaconal support programs for families.

The focal points lie in work with small children or with school children and youth. They do not sufficiently address and involve the whole family. Especially grandparents, parents who are separated and sponsors (godparents) are seldom invited to work together. When children have left home families in the parish are hardly ever approached or reached. That only happens again when they are senior citizens: there is little to offer the age group of the 45 to 65-year-olds and practically nothing for the large group of singles.

- **Family as the primary location of religious socialization**

The family is the primary space for experiencing religion. This remains true even though fewer and fewer parents tend towards a specific religious upbringing. The task of religious upbringing is increasingly being delegated to institutions, to child-care centers, to school, to children’s worship services. We are consequently witnessing a reversal of activity: parents no longer teach their children. Instead, children can teach their parents if they are accompanied and supported in so doing. It is often the children who demand religious rituals such as prayers at home, wish to be baptized, ask questions about life, and deal with death on the basis of their experiences in child-care centers.

This also applies to those who are distant from the church and who are decidedly “non-faith families”. In a study on family and religion, the theologian Michael Domsgen has found that the family is the decisive field of religious socialization even when the upbringing is not explicitly religious. For the one thing - according to Domsgen - the existential relational experiences that are gained in the family are indispensable for understanding, and talking about God and human beings. And moreover, it is a significant achievement for a family when the members trust, respect and honor each other mutually, when they read together, when they ponder and talk about religious questions and when they plan and celebrate religious feasts as family rituals.

We have to respect the fact that families themselves determine their canon of values and their culture. They have to find a common language to exchange in and to understand the experiences of their members. If the church intends to be successful in its religious educational work with children it must actively include their families. For this reason, religious and church offerings must look beyond the individual or specific group (“target group”) and include the whole system of the family.

- **Perceiving the family as a system**

Families enjoy fundamentally secure autonomy. That calls for respect for their accomplishments, for the form they choose, for their viewpoints, for their needs and for their values. That is a practical challenge for the church. Religious language and the social communication of the local and regional church must be translatable into the language of the families.

The concept of a family system that is broadly autonomous must not deceive us into believing that family systems are not increasingly dependent on intensive exchange with their environment. The proverbial “African village” that is needed to bring up a child must be designed and built by the family systems themselves. Many families are successful in this by themselves, in that they create optimum life conditions for their children with private and professional help from midwives, pediatricians, crèches, child care centers, family centers or schools. By contrast, other families need and wish for support.

From the vantage point of families this is helpful and good. It is important that in these situations the church also builds bridges to new organizations and life networks, for example, by engaging with schools, advisory services and family education.

- **Accompanying people during the course of their lives**

Many local churches reach their members in central, biographically relevant phases. They start early with offerings for the youngest and then for specific age groups. Important biographical transitions such as the reception into a child care center, entering school, changing schools, but also critical events in life such as the separation of parents are increasingly taken up and accompanied in worship services.

The United Church of Christ (UCC) devised such a liturgy and included in its Book of Worship in 1986. The introduction says: “This order is intended for those occasions when a man and a woman who have experienced a divorce wish to acknowledge responsibility for their separation, affirm the good that continues from the previous relationship, and promise in the presence of God, family, and supportive friends to begin a new relationship. Great sensitivity to the particular circumstances of the couple will be needed on the part of those who assist them in planning the service. [...] The service is a reminder that nothing can separate people from the love of God in Jesus Christ. [...] Hope and joy are appropriate in this service as a man and woman pledge goodwill to each other and responsibly arrange for continuing obligations they may share. [...]

**Excerpt from the concluding liturgy:**

*Leader / all*

We affirm you in the new commitments you have made:

Commitments which find you separated

But still concerned about each other

And wishing each other goodwill

...

and commitments which help

to heal the pain you may feel.

Count on God's presence;

trust our support;

begin anew.

*Leader*

Go forth into the world

in peace;

Be of good courage;

Hold fast to that

Which is good;

Render to no one evil for evil;

strengthen the fainthearted;

support the weak;

help the afflicted;

honor all people;

love and serve God;

rejoicing in the power

of the Holy Spirit.

## Where is Ralf?

“Where is Ralf now? Is he trying to get out of being here?,” Manni asks. The church is full to the last seat - no, to the next to last seat. For half an hour now, Manni has been sitting in the last row, keeping the seat next to him vacant and waiting for Ralf. Ralf’s daughter Nina is going to be confirmed today. As a crow flies father and daughter are only about 2.4 kilometers apart, but since the parents separated three years ago it is worlds away. “I feel sorry for Nina!” Manni thinks. “What can she do about her mother experiencing a second spring after a successful diet and her father preferring to put in extra hours at work instead of coming home.” The bells are ringing. Manni looks at his watch: Still three minutes and Ralf is still not here. The whole world, or at least the family, gives Ralf the blame: he has neglected his family. “Yes, he did too!” thinks Manni. He won’t make that mistake again with his new partner, is what Ralf now always emphasizes. But what has happened cannot be reversed. The family isolates Ralf. He is not invited to the confirmation celebration. He can catch up on that on “his” weekend with Nina, they say. When Ralf told him that, Manni asserted that the family can’t exclude him from church and arranged for Ralf to be with him here. ... Don’t Christians live by forgiveness? thinks Manni and looks up at the cross. The organ plays, the confirmands enter, no Ralf beside him. ... “My God, can’t parents let old matters rest for the sake of the children?!” A quick prayer typical of Manni. As the parish sings “Thanks for all good friends, thanks, oh Lord, for everyone” someone puts a hand on Manni’s shoulder. Ralf slides into the seat next to him. He smiles at Manni, even if somewhat tense, and whispers into his ear: “Thanks!”

*Christa A. Thiel*

Church and diaconal programs that are only directed at one generation often overlook the chances that families offer a place of holistic communication and learning that encompasses the generations. No matter in what phase of life we are, it offers special opportunities for our own social, cultural or religious development are offered on the basis of childhood, parenthood, sponsorship, grand-parenthood.

**A practice example of young and old:**

**A multi-generation house of the Apostle congregation in Münster**

Good youth work for its own, and other, young people has always been a trademark of the Apostle congregation. Senior citizens too have always formed their own group. It was only with the development of the church center in the multi-generation house that these two groups came together, and today - together with the child-care center - they form a bridge for inter-generational activities. Completely new programs were developed to encourage the generations to meet and learn from one another. They range from the old reading fairy tales to the young to the common media work and further to the virtual "Olympiad of the generations" on the games console. A side-effect is the developing and testing of a new form of inter-generational church practice that can be recommended to other parishes for imitation.

- **Giving families space**

Even where parish halls and churches are being closed, possibilities remain to build up and promote parish life. For example, the diaconal agency in Gronau took over the former parish hall as a district center and makes sure that the people in the neighborhood can meet there and experience support. Here parish life has clearly changed. But the church is still present in the district and is close to the people.

New forms of fellowship, new forms of voluntary involvement and new forms of religious practice will develop in the foreseeable future. Families will encounter the church on their path through life in many different places. Some families will bind themselves closely to one parish. But for the most, however, church and religious offerings in changing form and intensity will be part of family development.

For the church this means that it should perceive the places of families where encounter with church takes place as the place of the church. Child-care and family centers are particularly suited to this. Not only do the children spend a lot of their day there, parents and grandparents also go in and out. Making a child-care center into a place of the church means that all church elements should be anchored there: justice, assistance and education activity as well as the regular conducting of worship. People of all generations and ways of life are invited to participate in services which the families themselves have acknowledged to be helpful, and participated in actively. In this way families receive a new status in the local congregation.

### **A practice example**

#### **Grand things with fathers**

Encouraging fathers to actively shape their role in the family is the goal of father-child weekends. In cooperation with a child-care center an event is planned in two evenings for parents, or just for fathers. There are topics that promise a common adventure but also provide sufficient time in order to talk with other fathers about their own experiences in their role as father and about questions concerning the future. The evening generally concludes with an act of worship. An additional “father evening” offers the opportunity of evaluation. It often ends with the agreement: let’s do it again next year! A brochure gives information about the idea of work with fathers and children. It is available from the department of work with men and the diaconal agencies of both regional churches.

## What does family-friendliness mean? Ideas for further work:

### Family friendly church

- **Family friendly congregation**

A family-friendly congregation reaches families as early as possible and remains at their side through life. It expands its vision from the individual family member to the whole family system. It encounters families with respect and appreciation. It opens its rooms for families and invites them to participate. It understands itself as a part of civil society whose task it is to strengthen and to protect families.

A family-friendly church respects and promotes families as places of the first encounter with biblical narratives, with prayer, with blessing. It accompanies and supports families in the development of their own family culture. Church facilities such as child-care centers, or events such as children's worship services, Sunday School and religious education at school are supplements to the personal responsibility of every family. Congregational worship takes up the motifs of life from before birth to death, of failure and recovery, rupturing and becoming whole.

#### Tip:

##### **So that a festival becomes a celebration - celebrating after separation and divorce**

The department for single parent mothers and fathers in the Diakonia Germany has produced a brochure with examples of liturgical celebrations in one-parent families and patchwork families. It covers both recurrent festivals in the church year as well as rites of passage (baptism, entering school, confirmation, graduation etc.). The brochure raises awareness for the risk of excluding the diversity of family forms in prayers and worship services.

(Download under: <http://www.diakonie.de/materialsammlung-kita-5361-damit-das-fest-zum-fest-wird-6435.htm>)

- **Guidance as a diaconal responsibility**

Through the work of its diaconal ministries and the specialist services the Protestant churches in Westphalia and Lippe reach many more families than would be possible for the local churches. The possibilities of strengthening and supporting them are extraordinarily diverse through these services. They focus, above all, on bolstering families in economic and

social emergency situations through professional advice and counseling, and through reinforcing skills through family and adult education.

## **Initiative**

### **My Dad is coming**

The initiative “My Dad is coming” has been active since 2009 in referral service for cost-free accommodation for parents visiting their child in another city after separation or divorce.

The project strengthens fathers and mothers who live alone in their parenthood and promote the bonding efforts with the visited child or young person. It lowers the visit threshold and decreases the poverty risk of fathers and mothers who live alone, because they lessen the financial costs.

Over 300 hosts and over 100 parents have already registered across Germany. Even parents who live abroad are placed with hosts in Germany.

Further information at [www.mein-papa-kommt.de](http://www.mein-papa-kommt.de)

The family-oriented work of child-care facilities and family centers is like a seismograph in recording the pressure families are under in every day life. It helps the church to keep up with the times regarding practical programs and requirements for family friendliness.

The opening times of many Protestant child-care centers are not sufficiently attuned to the working needs of the parents. The build-up of places for under-three-year-olds is moving ahead but is still not completed. In any case there are no patent recipes for ideal opening times. The regional realities and job situations need to be analyzed and considered.

### **Practice example**

#### **The Bielefeld flax farm**

The Bielefeld flax farm is a facility of the von Laer Foundation. This is the way it deals with the opening times in the child care center: “The Bielefeld flax farm is open Mondays through Thursdays from 7:15 – 16:30h and Fridays until 16:00h. To help with your work-life balance we offer the following models beyond the normal opening hours:

#### **Minimax model**

Opening times: Monday – Friday from 6:30 – 20:30 and Saturday from 9:00 – 15:00. You can utilize these opening times if you are self-employed or your employer will pay €295 a month for this model.

In addition to this, you can finance this yourself when you go back to work again and meet the requirements.

#### **Extended opening times**

Do you need longer, or earlier, care for your child from time to time?

In the flax farm it is possible to book additional hours between 6:30 and 7:15 and after 16:30 or Friday after 16:00 for a small surcharge.

The Protestant association of day centers for children in Westphalia and Lippe seeks to strike a balance between the educational quality of the facility and the needs of parents for flexible opening times. Its position:

#### ***IV. Stable core times for educational processes or maximum flexibility of care times?***

##### ***The balancing act between need orientation and quality demand***

*Educational demand and educational expectations are sometimes in strong contradiction to the needs for great individual flexibility of the care times of individual families. Greater flexibility leads to children being brought and picked up during the course of the whole day. That may accommodate the needs of families but it means that there are hardly any times*

*left for undisturbed and concentrated learning. Yet these are indispensable if we want to do justice to the education demand and our educational mission.*

*The sponsoring bodies and professionals confront the challenge to carefully and responsibly weigh up the possibilities and limits of their child day-care center. A proper balance between educational quality and the consideration of the different needs for flexible care times must be found. The size and the structure of the center and the personal resources play an essential role. A larger facility with several groups and many pedagogical professionals can react more flexibly than a facility with two groups and at a maximum four co-workers.*

*It is to be recommended that the arranging of opening times be agreed upon in close exchange with the parents and the parent representatives.*

*It must be the goal of a child day center to arrange the opening times in such a way that they on the one hand correspond to the needs (of the majority) of the families and on the other hand make the enactment of the pedagogical demand for education through the corresponding framing conditions and clear structures possible.*

- **Church as employer**

As a service-provider, the Protestant church and its diaconal ministries face the special challenge of harmonizing their words and deeds under difficult conditions. As human enterprises, they both have to constantly admit their limits. In the competition for qualified and engaged men and women employees they will have to repeatedly develop and introduce models and systems of family-friendly business management. Supporting a work-life balance means supporting families in crises, promoting health and encouraging staff to put skills acquired in the family to good use at their workplaces. It goes without saying that there should be a variety of appropriate work-time models and fair payment.

### **Family-friendly society**

A strong civil society needs strong families who can get involved: critically, creatively, with time and readiness to take over responsibility. It needs the societal dialogue in which the different expectations are perceived, taken seriously and set into a relation to one another. It is about bringing both economic and political realities into dialogue in order to clarify what is desirable, feasible and affordable.

A family-friendly society shows itself locally in arranging “coalitions for families”, in the community and neighborhood projects and in the practical cooperation of the church with other civil society actors. It takes up the current topics of peace, justice and integrity of

creation and in economic transactions remembers the standpoint of the smallest and most vulnerable members of society.

- **Time for families**

Society is becoming increasingly aware that active family policies must, above all, safeguard family time, apart from family allowances and infrastructure. The new societal ideal of the parental couple who both have full-time jobs, and also the frequently pressing economic necessity for this, has entailed a reduction of time for the family to spend together, quite apart from the increase in child-care facilities.

In our aging society the next political question of time with its “care problem” is already on the agenda. In order to make the necessary time possible, work conditions and the infrastructure for families must be improved. In church and society the question of family time should also be worked through and answered in connection with gender questions. Up until now it has been women who have given up their careers to show care and concern for children and old people. In the future the contributions of both men and women will be needed to combine family and working life.

#### **Time bureaus and “family mainstreaming”**

After the 8<sup>th</sup> family report of the federal government in the spring of 2012 developed the topic “time policy” as a special concern of family policy the question is how the time needs of families can be coordinated with the challenges of working parents and every day life. The first communities are now beginning to develop local strategies of “family mainstreaming”. That involves, for example, adjusting opening times in administrative and educational facilities to the changed time needs of families. In Italy municipal time bureaus have started raising awareness among business enterprises for the topic of family time.

- **Family-friendly companies**

Economic enterprises increasingly recognize that the human resources of society are finite and that male and female employees need time for family life in order to work well for the long term. The 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> family reports of the German have designated the stressful phases of life for families with young children as the “rush hour of life” and called on companies to develop flexible work-time models. In the meantime a lot is happening because the family policies at the regional and federal level have acknowledged the need for action and now support companies in making further progress.

The demographic change and the ensuing projected and current lack of skilled workers has contributed to companies trying to gain and to hold good skilled workers, and especially women, through family-friendly work-time models. In fact, the needs of families and the reality of working hours - including sometimes significant travel times - are still drifting far apart. That was shown recently by the government's family report in 2011.

#### **From the diary of a woman business manager of a care service**

"Today I had a job interview that makes me think. To my question why she wanted to work in a diaconal care service the woman I interviewed answered that she had worked in a bakery several years, but that she now wanted to have family-friendlier working hours.

She was not hired. This was one of the reasons, because wherever people work in order to support others - especially other families - they are then especially tied up when the other people have their "free" time: in the evening hours, at noon, on the weekend.

In order to some how survive as an employer there are many part-time jobs - with all the problems connected to that. It is mostly women who work in this area and who have the largest share of the family work load to bear at home, too. The burden of coping with all the demands is articularly heavy. I, at least, don't have any good ideas about how family friendlier working hours can be arranged.

#### **Presented: Sure it can be done**

When Jürgen became a single parent he was taken out of shift service. When Marion and Elke had domestic care to do they were taken totally out of shift service. Mondays Thomas always had late shift to be able to care for his children while his wife worked. The family enterprise WERNER LANGER GmbH & Co. KG has 90 employees. In a three shift factory the employees produce about 6000 different technical synthetic parts. At present the enterprise has 35 different work time models, says the business manager Lars Frommberger, not without a little pride in his voice. In all, there have been 50 since the introduction of work time models. He understands himself as a Christian employer. He has a heart for his men and women workers. They are not only workers who have a job in a factory. They are human beings who also have chores and responsibilities in their families. For this reason he willingly accommodates them with these different work-time models even when it is not always easy to arrange. "But sure it can be done!" the employer emphasizes and smiles: "My grandfather did something similar when he made it possible decades ago for women to work part-time for him."

## **For discussion: Current issues in German family policy**

The following describes family policy issues, in each case supplemented with a pro and a con argument. What do you think about them? Add to the arguments and bring in your own experience - alone, with others, in your parish groups. Let others share in your knowledge at [www.familie-heute.de](http://www.familie-heute.de).

### **Basic child allowance (*Kindergrundsicherung*)**

For 2010 the legislator calculated the existence minimum for children at € 7008 a year. It is based on a material share (€ 4368) and a share for care and upbringing or education (€2640). Covering the basic needs of a child therefore costs €584 a month. Many organizations in the Protestant church advocate that policy-makers should energetically tackle the different models of providing a basic child allowance.

#### **PRO**

Most parents receive €184 in child benefit a month and may be able to deduct the child-care costs from their income tax. The child benefit is not sufficient to cover the actual costs for children. That is one of the reasons why the share of child poverty is so high in Germany. Families, especially single parents cannot support their children - they have too little income, they receive too little or no child support and the expenses are continually rising (e.g. energy costs). The consequence is: More than one million live from the lowest level of long-term unemployment benefit. A basic child allowance lying above the minimum need according to the social code would make recent benefits introduced in Germany (top-up child benefit or the education-and-participation package) and means testing superfluous. It would also significantly simplify the administration involved.

#### **CON**

One objection is that the funds for disbursing this basic allowance could be put to better use to improve care and education provision.

## **Care benefit (*Betreuungsgeld*)**

Care benefit is a sum provided by the government for parents who want to dedicate themselves full-time to bringing up a child at home in the first couple of years after birth.

### **PRO**

It is meant for parents who very consciously do not want to put their child in a crèche, i.e. do not want to apply for a place in a day-care facility. This sum is intended to support parents who want to care for their under-three-year-olds themselves.

### **CON**

The critics object that this will hold back poorer families and those not so interested in education from letting their children go to a child day-care center and that the children will consequently be deprived of important fostering. Studies in Thuringia, the only German federal state that has started paying care benefit, confirm this danger.

## **Public child day-care centers for children under three years of age**

After August 1, 2013 parents will have a right to claim a care place even for a one-year-old child. These places will be financed in part by the federal government; its implementation will be up to the states. In almost all the communities in North Rhine-Westphalia there are sufficient places on offer for three-to-six-year-old children, but opening hours are frequently not suitable for the families. There also places for about 22 percent of the children under three. North Rhine-Westphalia thus comes last in a comparison of the German states. The federal legislator assumes a demand for care places for under three-year-olds of 32 percent. Experts assume considerably higher figures: especially in large cities, over 50 percent.

### **PRO**

Care for children to enable parents to earn their living and early support - those are the two main arguments in the debate about care places in day-care facilities for under three-year-olds.

### **CON**

Women who want to bring up their children in the important first three years do not have a lobby. Instead of under-three care provision, there should be a greater guarantee that women can afterwards return to their careers without disadvantage.

## **Opening time in child day-care facilities**

Long opening hours and early care make the working life of parents possible in the first place. The employment system requires flexible employees – this is very demanding on families. They then depend on the corresponding offerings of the child day-care facilities.

### **PRO**

There are already child day-care facilities, e.g. in Finland, that are open 24 hours and in which children can be taken care of up to ten hours a day according to the shift plan of the parents. In the light of the economic constraints on young families it is difficult to find the appropriate limit. In North Rhine-Westphalia children can at most stay in such centers for nine hours a day. That is not enough. Ideological debates that only end up burdening the children and the parents are not helpful. Good, reliable child care also brings stability to families.

### **CON**

The need in the regions is different. General demands do not help. Surveys of need must take place locally before opening hours are changed. Beyond that, it is not clear why a child must adapt to the rhythm of business and not the other way around. The quality of a child day care facility, learning together in groups, stable reference persons - all that cannot be preserved in round-the-clock care.

## **Family and school**

When children come to school their reliable care into afternoon hours is not always guaranteed. The “open all day” scheme offers voluntary supervision in the afternoon after the usual school program of the half-day school. All-day schools with an educational approach that goes beyond the usual classes are still the exception.

### **PRO**

School as a place of learning and living for children is no substitute for the family, nor should it be. It is good when the remaining time can also be dedicated to family life.

### **CON**

Frequently the educational approaches of schools assume that the family promotes the children over and beyond the school – e.g. through helping with homework. This fact alone means that children who come from educationally uninterested milieus, or children whose parents don't have sufficient time to help for reasons of work, can expect to have problems in school even when they attend all-day schools.

## **Gender roles in the family**

Young families favor the life model of partnership that also sees raising children as a shared responsibility. The model runs into an obstacle when the first child is born.

### **PRO**

It is remarkable that in the cases where the husband is less career-oriented the idea of partnership can also be maintained during the period of upbringing. Models like the “father months” to help bring up the child support the assignment of tasks in the family and at work. There are models in which both parents reduce their work time by 60 to 80 percent and find that very satisfactory.

### **CON**

What happens already is that the parent with the higher income reduces his or her work time less, if at all. Because this is frequently the husband, there is again a more traditional role allocation. Having the privilege of being a father again comes down to a question of income. Combining a family and a career is about more than good management: it means developing new models of life and work and also about validating the upbringing competence of fathers and the professional interests of women.

## **Poverty prevention**

Based on the idea of early education more and more communities are placing emphasis on early help and support possibilities for children and parents. The fine-tuning and coordination of these offerings and the adjustment to the lives of young families in the form of “prevention chains” represent a very present challenge.

### **PRO**

Prevention chains are an effective instrument to work against milieu-conditioned education restrictions. Through cooperation, child day-care facilities, youth offices, schools, churches and other actors at the communal level should set up effective networks against the disadvantaging of children that can support families effectively. It is important that the communities receive sufficient resources for these undertakings.

### **CON**

The communities struggling to balance their budget will not be able to invest sufficiently here. In implementing such projects the question emerges: Can a wide political consensus for the special support of less privileged groups be upheld? Will more investments in child day-care centers and schools in the poorest city areas be accepted?

## **Threat to child well-being and child protection**

The well-being of the child is a central concept in the context of family law in the area of “parental care” and in custody measures. Child well-being is a central legal norm and simultaneously an indefinite concept that must always be made concrete in the individual case. It serves as a ground for state intervention in the family. Threats to children in families and in the environment of families can be physical, sexual and emotional maltreatment and neglect. Time and again spectacular cases provoke the question: Why did the authorities not intervene earlier? Is it possible to strengthen the number of personnel, their qualifications and the quality of the care approaches followed by the youth welfare offices?

### **PRO**

Recognizing the threat to children in the protected sphere of the family is not easy for friends, acquaintances and neighbors. They need the professionals from the youth office so that the right steps are initiated.

After all, every week three children in Germany die from the consequences of maltreatment. Most of them are under six years of age.

### **CON**

It is not enough to focus on the youth welfare offices. The personnel in kindergartens and schools must be more intensively trained in order to recognize the first signs of maltreatment in the behavior of the children. There are studies on this. Everyone who deals with children must be obligated to attend these special training courses.

## **Married couple splitting**

Married couple splitting in tax law mirrors the special status that marriage has in the German constitution. Advantages accrue when the income difference between the partners is large. Marriage is seen as an economic union. Both incomes are taken together. The sum is cut in half and from it the income tax is calculated. The value is then doubled again. Through this a high progression advantage is gained that has a strong effect with a large difference in income or a high income. Married couple splitting does not apply to registered civil unions.

### **PRO**

Through married couple splitting the mutual responsibility in marriage is taken seriously and joint earnings form the basis for taxation. The state does not get involved in the division of labor within the marriage.

### **CON**

Childless couples also profit from the married couple splitting. Families with children who have low incomes and lie in the lower progression realm do not profit from these calculations.

## **The 'need community' (*Bedarfsgemeinschaft*) in social law**

Under the social code, subsistence obligations do not only apply to kinship relationships in a household. The income and assets of a partner are also to be considered with respect to a person who also belongs to the 'need community' if they live together in a common household so that, by a rational estimation, the mutual will is to be assumed that they assume responsibility for and stand by one another.

### **PRO**

This engages seriously with the willingness to show responsibility that is signaled by the life together.

### **CON**

The degree of standing by one another in life partnerships is of different intensity and difficult to establish.

## **Rainbow families**

Families are designated as rainbow families in which children live with two same-sex partners as a family. The children come from previous heterosexual marriages and partnerships, from artificial insemination or previous adoptions. For example, the adoption rights of same-sex partners are a matter of controversy.

### **PRO**

Couples wish for a child and their interest in living in a family with children deserves respect and support by society.

### **CON**

Disadvantages may arise for children that live in such family forms.

## **Care time (*Pflegezeit*)**

It is the goal of the care time law from the year 2008 to enable employed persons to care for near relatives who are in need of care in a home context and thus to better combine work and family care. Male and female employees can stay home from work on full pay for up to ten days when they have to organize appropriate care for a close relative in an acute situation or to secure the provision of care at this time. Beyond this, it is possible to interrupt one's work for up to six months without pay. In this time there is special protection against losing one's job.

### **PRO**

The law helps people to take the time needed to adapt to the changes arising from the care situation.

### **CON**

This law was certainly greeted by many as a step in the right direction. Critics note, however, that it still does not give sufficiently effective relief for caring relatives, because it is restricted to six months.

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Responses to be addressed to the Church Office of the Evangelical Church of Westphalia:

[Juergen.Traphoener@lka.ekvw.de](mailto:Juergen.Traphoener@lka.ekvw.de)

If you have any experience reports, organizational ideas, or descriptions of projects and events, please send them to Christa A. Thiel, [info@familien-heute.de](mailto:info@familien-heute.de)