

# Leadership

## Family and Friends

### The restricted family and being 'just' good friends

Family, children and families, intergenerational and all-age tags bring interesting small print for many people. The counter-cultural movement of whole community - against the niche marketing 'target audience' driven methodologies - has been gaining momentum over the past decade or so. There is a much wider appreciation, even among larger churches (in the past the bastions of divide and conquer approaches) of the intergenerational values of community, inclusion, dialogue, diverse learning approaches, the priority of discipleship, mentoring and honouring both the very young and the very old. And the good news for the strong, the youth and the boomers is that while they are burdened with expectations of privilege in our society, intergenerational community puts them in the midst as equals, but without pressure to lead or win.

### But the small print is still there...

When we announce **Families**, or **all age**, or **intergenerational community** expressions, the "fine print readers" always point it out to me.

**Not everyone has children.**

**There are single people in our community**

**Not everyone comes in a family package**



### And the extra fine print behind these statements:

Single People and Couples without children feel alienated by things that involve children.

Family is a painful experience for some and by invoking family you make some people uncomfortable.

Only immediate under the one roof family relationships count when we speak of family.

There are tight boundaries of categories of "in" a family and "in" a demographic group.

If there is anywhere that we should **question the fine print of society**, blow it up big so everyone sees it - and then set a bomb under it and blow it up for good, the church is surely the place.

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Right now I can feel the credibility police preparing their search warrant. Mrs. Barnett, you have been married to the one man for close to 20 years, you have two children, you all live under the same roof in suburbia – and you are a professional families advocate. We think you might be a little bit biased.

Of course I am biased, but it is my experience of living in community, having a third adult in our household (definitely she became one of the family), and of job sharing with my husband, blurring the boundaries of personal and professional, family, community and ministry life that have led me to question the authenticity of the categories of “Family” and “having/not having children”.

**Pastoral note:** I fully know that I am treading in territory of pain and grief for – I believe it almost everybody. This is not an autobiographical piece to launder my personal pain – and I am not going to try to credential myself by citing personal, familial or sexual ordeals. Let it suffice, my friends, that my passion for healing and freedom within - and emanating from - the body of Christ runs on a full tank of sin, grief & heartache-distillate. And with respect: doesn't yours? Here I am seeking to speak plainly, wisely and prophetically into the intersection of our cultural and biblical notions of personhood.

## Questioning the consumer categories

*“we don't have children”*

I use this phrase as much as anyone: ‘Do you have kids?’ ‘Yes, I have two boys!’ But I wish I didn't. It doesn't agree with my theology or anthropology. My children belong with me – how my heart stirs towards them in solidarity for their good, their shalom, their sustenance, their wholeness.



They define for me what love is, calling forth my most powerful expressions of self giving, grace, risk, and courage, and cause me to live for the ‘other’ in ways I wouldn't believe I had in me. But they are not ‘mine’; I don't ‘have’ them – as possessions, as items as objects. Contemporary culture has taken this idolatrous idea of ‘having’ children to an obscene extreme. Children are depicted regularly as celebrity appendages. Those who find it difficult to fall pregnant are thought to be great sufferers. Some people do experience great grief and pain in the frustration of this process, and we stand with them as we stand with all who suffer. But there is a falseness as well in the presumption, that these categories of child acquisition are mutually exclusive.

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Some people who have procreated and produced offspring are not in an expresses relationship with their children – they are estranged or inaccessible. These barriers come in many forms, divorce, death, overseas employment opportunities, illness, education, all can effect a break in lived out relationship.



On the other hand, there are people who have never given birth to their own offspring, who are in such delightful, regular, affectionate, reliable, secure and ongoing relationship with children, it is a nonsense to say that they don't 'have' any children in their lives.



But our church structures sometimes repeat the rhetoric of our times and culture – and create gatherings which presume and divide based on the criterion of 'having children' or not. We have implicitly taught a whole generation or two of young adults that they are childless until they physically procreate – and in doing so we have made another 2 generations virtual orphans in the faith community, and over burdened two generations of parents, left to shoulder raising children in isolation.

The church, the kingdom of God, of all places can a haven where children are not 'possessed' (how can we hope to fight human trafficking while we treat our own children as possessions?) where people are not judged and segregated according to their acquisitions, and where all humans are regarded equally as creatures of the most high God, with more in common – their blue print Imago Dei, and their corruptibility, their incarnational boundedness and their limitless spiritual heritage – than they have to separate them.

Playful, creative and inquisitive young adult singles and older retired empty-nester couples are constantly **expected to disdain**, or at best tolerate and humour interactions that involve children. And reciprocally, intelligent, practical sensible children are **expected to be bored** and disengaged when adults begin to share wisdom and logic.

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### *We don't have relationships*

The second manner in which consumer categories are reinforced in the church is in the narrow range of relational typologies that are normalised.

In my previous example I deliberately made a distinction between children and young adult singles and older retired empty-nester couples. These are so standard, I wonder if you even noticed. Or perhaps, like me you were disturbed by this. Because you don't fit easily into them. This is not about the morality of which relationships we think the church can (I hate this word) "condone" – so condescending as it is. How many different types of relationships are represented in your community? The married couple with one partner absent on business for a third of the year, the married couple who live with the in-laws and run a family business with all hands to the wheel, the separated couple who are still living under the same roof, the married couple with kids (but dad's having an affair), the divorced couple who do equal shared care of the children, the single men and women who live in share houses, some mixed, some single gender, the gay couple, the celibate lesbian, the grandparents who do 90% of the child care for their grand children, the widow, the boarder at the private school dorm, the family with an overseas student in the spare room, the unmarried couple who live together, the older woman who take in students from time to time.

All of these relationships hold the potential for God's relentless and sneaky grace, and they all can go pear-shaped and sow seeds of destruction.

When we think of **'having' relationships, again as a possession**, we move towards the toxic territory of **using one another**, and the life circumstances we are in as acquisitional status markers. This is the kind of thing that made Jesus blood boil. Paul too.

Part of the destructive narrative of our consumer culture is that real relationships are about sex. We even use the hideous travesty saying 'They had sex' - again a short hand way of referencing our culture's idolatrous reduction of relationship, and people to things that can be had, used, priced, and given a use-by date.

Elaine Storkey has done some important work on the notion of valuing friendship.

She counters the almost overwhelming **misdirection of our society towards sexual relationships**, which subsequently de-value other forms of association; particularly friendship, family relationships of all configurations, voluntary associations and collaborations.

*"...the idea that friendship is merely a prelude to marriage. The married or cohabiting state is seen as the 'normal' one, with friendship as a poor and temporary substitute, distinctly inferior to sexual partnering. We carry this implication around even by the language we accept. Two people declare publicly they are 'just good friends' and we accept this as a denial of a deeper relationship. We suspect they are probably lying. We are disappointed if it is true. For being "just good friends" is something negative, indicating that their affection is only friendship, nothing deeper like romance..."*

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She continues, pointing to the way this ironically results in people missing great opportunities for safe and healthy intimacy within friendship.

*"It is interesting that even though people are searching for greater intimacy with others, they rarely see this as being a search for deeper friendship. It is more likely to be for some more exclusive relationship, often a sexual one. It is sad that in busy lives friends are those who generally put up with fifth best. They are the ones who receive the fag-ends of our time when all the essential duties are performed." E Storkey*

How precious that gift of being (just – let us read it not negatively in small print, but in big banner letters, positively as a herald of justice) **good friends**. We hear the invitation for our relationships as we lay down exclusive or possessive claims as superior terms, to be liberated in Love and Justice. Grown ups and children and singles and marrieds and widows and households and seperateds – all can be just and good friends. The Welcome Mat is out for everyone.



Jesus' life was rather category resistant, but clearly included friendships, relationships, intimacies. Perhaps you share my frustration observing Hollywood's obsession with sex and unable to portray the life of Jesus without sexualising these deeply personal encounters.

Jesus was single, he lived in community, he participated in the hospitality of extended families, he was estranged from some of his blood relations, he welcomed the company of children and women, he expressed affection and received intimate bodily expressions: anointing, kisses, embraces...and we have no idea what he did in the 30 years preceding the start of his public ministry: was he married, then widowed as some have suggested? was he unattractive and ostracised by local girls and their families seeking a good match? did he sow some wild oats? did he have his heart broken?

Whatever answers may be arguable from scripture, Jesus clearly both wouldn't fit nicely in our 'do you or don't you have kids?' and our 'do you or don't you have sex?' criterioned culture, just as there are hints he didn't quite fit in his own.

**Question is: can Jesus come to church? To home group? To dinner at my place.**

Let our communities be a place where relationship that is grounded in grace, not sex, is celebrated and encouraged. Let our communities be a place where all of us are welcomed because we all belong to one another in relationship, not because of what we possess or the relationship we think we 'have.'

May our homes be filled with dancing, may our streets be filled with joy, may injustice bow to Jesus as the people turn to pray...