

Putting the family back into community

The big issue

This autumn two stories concerning dysfunctional families have shocked the country. Firstly there was the conviction of Karen Matthews from Dewsbury in West Yorkshire, for the kidnap and false imprisonment of her own daughter, Shannon. Secondly, there was the horrific abuse and murder of Baby 'P' in Haringey, London. Both of these terrible crimes created a huge amount of discussion by the media and politicians about the state of families and what it means for community life in the UK today.

But why do Christians care about marriage and families? Is it because we like being judgemental towards others? Or because we are nostalgic about how life used to be?

The reason we should care about families is neither of these reasons – but because we care about social justice and combating the poverty that damages so many young lives in the UK. Having spent all my working life either managing hostels for homeless people or working with deprived communities, I am convinced that the biggest change in the UK could come through a transformed approach to commitment within the family.

The source of many problems

Let me be clear: material poverty, debt and most of all, gross financial inequality are massive problems in the UK today. But we have to remember that the youth crime, low self-esteem, anger and violence that are so common in communities across the UK are not simply caused by material needs. Violence and anger are like destructive weeds which grow rapidly in the soil of dysfunctional family life.

I worked for 10 years with homeless people and day after day, I saw those who had been highly damaged by deprivation, drugs, self harm, prostitution, violence and low self-esteem. But underpinning all of these issues, one factor towered above all the others – family breakdown. I would get used to hearing stories from our residents about violent, neglectful or completely absent fathers and mothers who just could not cope.

Poverty is not just about low-incomes just as homelessness is not simply about houselessness. Poverty is also about relationships and identity.

The relationships within a family are always vitally important but especially for the first five years of our lives. The personality and attributes that we are born with need to be nurtured within a loving community. If we are surrounded by anger, strife and inconsistency then it has a huge effect on our wellbeing and emotional development. This is the poverty of relationships that affects so many young people today.

A deeper issue is the poverty of identity which is shown in the rise in mental health problems and the feelings of meaningless among so many young people today. As the UNICEF report found last year: UK children are least happy in Europe. Dysfunctional family life undermines the human need to find identity within a group where you are accepted and who have your best intentions at heart. It is no wonder that gangs fill this void.

All of this means that family life is vital if communities are to be transformed. Trying to fight poverty without addressing the issue of family life is trying to fill a leaky bucket.

What we can all do

Strengthening family life should be the nation's number one priority to reverse the spiral of entrenched poverty, anger and violence in our communities.

Commitment, fidelity and strong families are not old fashioned ideas from history - they are vital to our nation's health. And as Christians we care about families because we care about social justice. We believe in a God who is passionate about people – and because of this the state of family life in the UK is more important than the state of the economy.

So what must be done? From the government there should be an unequivocal policy shift to invest long term resources into maintaining relationships. A key target for government policy should be to increase the amount of children who are brought up by both their parents. Agencies which run parenting and relationship programmes should be heavily invested in. The tax system should be shaped to reward long term commitment – for example restoring the married couple's transferable tax allowance would mean that a couple can benefit from a double personal allowance if one chooses to stay at home with children. Also, the benefit system should ensure that a lone mother is not penalised for living with, or marrying, the father of her child.

However, the state of family life will not be changed by policy changes alone. The real change will come from grassroots activists concerned about the crisis facing their neighbourhoods. All Churches could focus their mission on strengthening relationships – the running of marriage preparation courses, parenting courses, reconciliation services and quality youth and children's work.

These are the kind of things which healthy congregations do well – reaching out with love and grace to those who are short on both.

On a more individual level we could all support our friends who are struggling in their relationships. Can you offer to talk and pray with those you know are struggling? Could you offer to help practically – perhaps by offering to baby sit for them to give them time together to rediscover why they are together in the first place? We also need to expose the lie that so often said that men can be good fathers without being a good husbands or partners to their mother. The best gift a father can ever give to his children is to love their mother.

Those who have children and are sexually unfaithful are not just cheating on their partners but on their children.

There is hope for the family but there are also major challenges. We need to see a transformation in the very culture of our communities which increasingly operate without a moral framework of commitment within the family. The structural issues of material poverty and inequality need to be addressed but commitment within families' will always lie at the heart of transformed communities. Let us call for government to support and invest in families but lets get active as Churches and as individuals, let's do all we can to protect and support relationships, to show love in action and re-build our broken communities.