

## F A I T H     I N     T H E     F A M I L Y

**EDITORIAL**

It has been pointed out that we all have to deal with change from the moment we are born, but there seems no doubt that the pace of change in our modern societies is unprecedented. How does this affect a faith rooted in the history of two thousand years ago?

As the articles in this newsletter show, changes such as a widening gap between poverty and affluence, global communications and increasing secularism, all affect families and their faith. Then there is the multi-faith dimension: in some areas writers tell of good relations with other faiths; in others it causes disruption and fear.

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In many parts of Africa and in the Western world, faith used to be nurtured in the family and in society. Going to church and reading the Bible was what many people did: it was "fashionable". Times change. Now, the transmission and nurturing of faith has to be worked for in a range of ways: by parents, by church evangelism, by modern communications such as the internet. In some cultures fathers were – and are – pivotal in the transmission of faith to their families; yet several articles, describing the situation now, tell of their lack of involvement. Perhaps recognising that there is a problem is the start of a solution. Perhaps, in a fast-changing society, where the extended family can be weakened and fragmented, godparents can provide support and encouragement for

the child's faith journey. There is Good News in this newsletter. Some articles tell of the difficulties leading to deeper faith, more family and personal commitment, more understanding. In Paraguay, greater emphasis is being put on the family in the context of evangelism and many parents and children are benefiting from this new focus. But parents, godparents and churches need to do more, because the transmission of faith to future generations cannot be taken for granted. Even if there never was a godly age, the barriers to faith in the third millennium are very real. Jesus lived in a troubled and war-torn society, fragmented by injustice and poverty and where people prayed to many false gods. His message is as relevant now as it was two thousand years ago.

## BOTSWANA

In this fast-changing society faith in the family is a challenge. In many homes, young members of the family are leaving the traditional church and joining other churches which they say are lively and charismatic. This leads to differences in the family faith. These churches lure young people from other churches with promises of finding them shelter, clothing, food, etc. Young men are joining Islam with the promise that they will be given shelter and food. With unemployment high among our youth, who can refuse such an offer? These young men are then sent to rural places to spread Islam. The rural folk, seeing how well the young men are looked after, then join en masse, so that they could get the same help they badly need. As long as these promises are fulfilled, they will never leave. Is that faith? Certainly not.

As parents, we should teach our children that faith cannot be bought with gifts. As parents, our faith in God should be strong so as to set a good example to our children. We should pray together as parents. Let us conduct our own Bible studies at home with our children. We must plant a seed in our children's hearts about God. The seed has to be watered for it to grow.

Families who have non-believers try to help them become believers. We believers

are the key for their salvation. We have to reach out in love, begin to pray for them to call them into the Kingdom of God. These people eventually begin to take interest in the things of God, and submit to His will. We don't have to leave our family members, or other people who are non-believers, in darkness.

The churches and other church organisations are trying their best by way of ecumenism: coming together and discussing some thorny issues concerning our Christian faith, our fears and hopes

amid the HIV/AIDS pandemic and youth problems. Interdenominational youth groups are formed as Boys and Girls Brigades. Churches should not sideline the youth in the Church; this makes them idle and begin to hate church. Let us involve them in decision-making and give them some responsibilities.

## CAMEROON

I was born and grew up in a Christian family. Every morning before any other activity and every evening the family got together for prayer. My parents taught us that it is very important to start and end a day with God so as to have His guidance in whatever we do. Every Sunday, the day for God, we had to stop every other activity and go to church. Afterwards, everybody was free to go round and visit friends, in order to socialise and to evangelise because we want the family of God to expand and grow. My parents used to tell us: if we follow Jesus they would be happy and proud of us because we will grow in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men, like Jesus.

During my childhood, many people would pick on children from Christian families, especially the pastors and other church workers, and criticise the misbehaviour of these ministers' children. "The reason for these children's bad behaviour," they said, "is that the pastors and their wives are very busy attending to other people in the Church and have very little time for their own families." A lot is expected from pastors' children, and yet they are like all other children. A friend of mine was often challenged by the headmistress

of the Presbyterian missionary boarding school, because she is a pastor's daughter. One day she was very angry and complained to us saying, "If my father is a pastor, I am not one, and I have the right to be like other students. Why should the headmistress always blame me for everything that goes wrong in our class? I am tired, I wish I was in another school where they do not know me neither my father."

I gave my life to Christ in High School and I prayed that I would marry a Christian so we can journey together to Heaven and bring up our children in a Christian way. Now I am very grateful and thank God that my dear husband is conscious that his first parish is at home. Together we try our best to win our children's souls to Christ. There is no better inheritance we can give them. As an Anglican Bishop, my husband's priesthood begins in the family. He presides with love over the family altar, and when he is travelling, I take his place. We all, together with the children from the oldest to the youngest, take turns to lead the family worship. We have praise, followed by a Bible passage and a brief message. Then, we pray together on specific prayer items listed in the family

prayer book. Any visitors to the house are welcomed to join in the family worship.

Through the years, I have seen our children growing in confidence and love for God. They are also humbled to see their parents, especially their father, a prelate, listening with respect to them as they expound God's word. We also ask each other forgiveness when we have wronged or hurt the other.

So, dear brethren, we have learnt that we are called to set an example of God's love right at home, because the world will not know Him if He is not seen to make a difference right from our families, and fathers are supposed to be priests in their families, presiding over the family altar. We are also teaching the same responsibility through our men's and women's fellowship; that every parent needs to build the faith of their children from when they are young, not only by talking to them but also by praying for them and with them, plus involving them in leadership right from the family altar.

# NIGERIA

The African family can be described as being closely knit. The children are brought up to obey, serve and later support their parents. Therefore people remain attached and loyal to their parents even when they have become married and had their own children. So parents have a big influence on the family. It is therefore easy for parents to pass their faith and practice on to their children.

The extended family system also helps to ensure that the cherished ideals of the family are kept and passed on, even in the absence of the biological parents or where the parents are incapable of exerting full control over the children. In the extended family system, even distant cousins see themselves as brothers and sisters, depending on one another. Hence children respect uncles and aunts just as they respect their parents. These older ones see it as their duty to help out younger relations as needs arise. If necessary, they discipline their nephews, nieces and younger ones. It therefore becomes easy in Africa for families to share, celebrate and transmit their Christian faith.

There are of course some homes in which parents are backsliding or getting lukewarm in their faith.

- Enthusiasm of the children in some cases has helped rekindle the interest of their parents.
- It is known that some parents would encourage the children to go to Church on Sundays and weekly activities and then sit back at home to watch television programmes or read newspapers. This is more often seen among men. Some would even drive their wives and children to Church, go back home and come back to collect them after service.
- Local satellite television is gradually eroding the faith of many. Different religious groups preach their doctrines on television and radio and have direct influence on the people's faith.
- Advertising of various films shown on television has tended to erode the faith of people. Advertising tends to glamorize negative habits like smoking, alcoholism, gambling, violence, carefree dressing attitudes, immorality and such vices.
- Since the Church teaches against such ways of life, association with them often leads to conflicts in individual life and families.
- Various governments and organisations in Nigeria have made attempts to control things aired on radio and television. Locally-produced film goes through a Centre Board,

which grades them, to help parents choose the films their children watch, and the Federal Government recently banned the airing of violent and immoral films in Nigeria.

Modern families fiercely protect members of their families from influence of other religions. A person could be disowned, his rights and properties withheld for converting to another religion.

When Christianity came to Africa, conversion of the head of the family often meant the conversion of all. The family ties were carried into Christianity by the converted head of the family. This helped the growth of Christianity. The Church keyed her teaching to these strong family ties.

Such occasions as Baptism and Confirmation are used for teaching the roles of parents and godparents to the children. The growth of children's ministries has enhanced the family worship life. In Nigeria there are two main ministries: Child Evangelism Ministry and Children Evangelism Fellowship. These help churches, irrespective of denomination, to train children's teachers in the Diocese. It is often co-ordinated at Diocesan level. The Diocese of Abuja, for example, recently published a book containing lessons for three classes covering every Sunday in the year.

In our cultural setting, faith in the family most of the time is personal. Many fathers want to make their family members believe in their own faith. However, many are liberal about forcing their family members into a different faith. The southwest part of Nigeria has many people belonging to different faiths, yet they can be members of the same family. Inter-faith is a common phenomenon there and yet there is hardly any religious unrest or fights. Faith is believed to be personal between a person and his God.

In the Anglican Communion in Nigeria, many Dioceses, and especially Kaduna Diocese, have men's fellowship in almost all the parishes. They organise prayers, fasting and Bible studies for their members and by so doing are also stirring their families' faith. They are very much involved in sharing the Anglican faith in evangelism, and God is helping them by way of soul-winning.

Family altar is encouraged in most homes, with the father leading and all members of the family participating. Parents also believe in infant baptism as a way of introducing Christ to their young ones early. At Christmas, some families celebrate with buying of new dresses, preparing special dishes to entertain friends and neighbours. While to some it is a time of sober reflection on the significance of the birth of the Saviour, to a few it is the only time to go to church in the year.

Church-based programmes and seminars are always being organised, and at the beginning of every quarter they organise fasting and prayer for intercession for the family, Church and nation. At the end of the year, they organise a love feast called "Pilgrim Fathers": that is we are pilgrims on earth. It is a time for reaching out to the

unsaved, both within and those of other faiths. It will be a thing of encouragement to also mention that these fathers adopt village churches. They help in finance and other developments, both physical and spiritual.

It will be beautiful if every Christian father will be able to lead all their family members in the way of Christ, like Abraham, of whom God said He will command His children and household after him, in the way of God (Genesis 18:17-19).

We dwell in an inter-faith society, yet – thanks be to God – many Christian families still stand firm in their faith. There is nothing too hard for God, even for fathers who are trusting Him for the salvation of members of their families who are still unsaved. Love is the greatest weapon needed for such families, and it is also what is helping us to reach out in Kaduna Diocese. Love to our members and also to those of other faiths. Our Lord said much on this in Matthew 22:37-39.

Matters of faith are very important to most families in Nigeria. Therefore other world faiths have not been able to influence many people. While there exists many other faiths, ie Buddhism, Guru-Maharaj, Bahai, Islam, etc, most people remain within their faith. Many Anglicans do defect to Pentecostal churches but soon get tired of the hype and return or have dual membership. For many who are not within the mainline denominations, they remain with the main African Traditional Religion, or Animism, as it is called. Nigeria describes itself as a "secular" society, only to say that no one single religion has monopoly over the other, especially with the ever-growing influence of Islam. With sophisticated marketing by global companies, this has little or no effect, as the nation is behind in the world of technology. In both cases, as people become more affluent, there exists tension between practise and belief.



In Ughelli Diocese, the women of the Anglican faith hold group prayer meetings weekly and come together once a month for congregational meetings where common problems are ironed out. Visitations are held, where individual homes are visited for prayers. Bible studies are also held in which women study the Bible. Priests are normally invited to guide the members on Bible study in the Church.

The Anglican Communion faithful pass on their faith by adhering seriously to the injunctions in Deuteronomy 6:6-7 which enjoins all parents, especially fathers, to see to the teaching of their children and to impart the Lord's instructions to them. The children are also encouraged to attend Sunday Schools. This has brought about the Anglican Children Ministry – a ministry within the Church concerned primarily with the children. The National Conference for this ministry, held in September, aims at inculcating in the children the true virtues of Christians and their belief in our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is true that other worldly pressures have some effect on the Anglican Communion. For example, the Government, in a bid to make all schools properly managed, has taken over the teacher training colleges, primary schools and secondary schools that were built and managed by the Anglican Communion. The Government pays the salaries of the teachers and carries out renovation work in these schools but the area of religious instruction has not been addressed at all. So there is a situation whereby some children of Anglican faithfuls do not fully imbibe the moral lessons that their parents want them to get. The strict discipline which had hitherto been the laurels obtained in the Anglican schools is no longer there. This is the reason the Church is calling for a return of schools to the missions. Some States have hearkened to this clarion call, but the Nigerian Union of Teachers is against any move to go back. Here is the stalemate.

Other world faiths have some effect on the Anglican Church. Most of the up-coming Pentecostal churches please the youthful minds, where people jump up, dance and say long prayers standing up. The youths tend to say that the mode of Anglican worship is now conservative and needs modernisation. This has made some young men and women drift to other world faiths, especially members of families who have no steadfast faith. Another area that also confuses the youth is that of miracles. Instead of waiting patiently for God's miraculous works, they want instant prophecy and miracles. They forget Christ's advice of Matthew. 24:24 about false Christs.

Another area is the effect of sophisticated marketing by global companies, for example on clothes, with dresses that make the wearer half-naked in the name of fashion. These are illegally infiltrated into Nigeria. The companies are happy that their products are marketed, but our youth do not wait to think whether these sophisticated dresses, shoes and caps are actually meant for them or not. It is high time our youths are told and corrected on the spot instead of being left for courtesy's sake to roam about in ignorance.

Globally, the Christian faith faces the challenge of our material and degenerated society. A decadent society with moral and spiritual pollution, selfishness and injustice, where the emphasis is on material possessions rather than on heavenly things. These have been the difficult experience of sharing our faith among families in Nigeria. And the socio-economic trend, coupled with poverty, threatens positive sharing of the faith within and outside the family. Parents in a bid to cater for their wards, have little or no time to organise, share and transfer their faith to the younger generation. Christian faith cannot be transferred in isolation, and faith not shared is no faith. Families now rely more on the Church (which is battling for survival in a disorganised society) for their spiritual growth. The consequence is increase in delinquency, violent crimes, immorality, and disobedience to constituted authority.

However, we are comforted with the word of God: "With men it is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 18:18). There is evidence to prove that God has not abandoned the Nigerian family and the Church. The Church should, therefore, rise to the challenge of the material society. The Church should spend its resources on programmes organised for the spiritual welfare of the family. In addition to revitalising the existing ones, new programmes should be incorporated such as workshops, seminars, church revivals and crusades. The Church should also evolve strategies of combating the indifferent attitude of husbands and men to church activities. Men generally pay no attention to church programmes and this has negatively affected the family struggle for spiritual survival. Our faith, though simple, demands maximum co-operation from both families and the Church.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). In the Christian religion we believe that when we pray, whatever we ask of our Father, we will receive. In Sierra Leone, we sing a popular chorus which says, "Have faith in God, wonderful things happen to you if you have faith in God".

Wonderful things did happen to my family because of faith during the January 1999 invasion of our capital, Freetown, by rebels. We were awoken around 6am by continuous gunshots. As each minute ticked by, the gun shots sounded nearer and nearer, and the telephone kept on ringing with everybody obviously confused and afraid as a result of what was going on. Our only hope at that time was to pray with all the faith we could muster. At times, it became even impossible to pray because we realised that fighting between two groups was going on in our backyard. Gun cartridges and missiles landed on parts of our house. I asked the children and other people in the house to just be calling Jesus! Jesus! I believe what the word of God says, that the Name of the Lord is a strong tower where we can hide. Indeed, it was a name that hid us and not a single gunshot landed in the room in which we were gathered for nearly three weeks, neither did any rebel enter our house.

Parents can teach their children about faith and the Church, by studying the word of God. It is very important that children are taught the word of God at a very early age. In fact, from when they are babies, they should be hearing the name Jesus. They will grow up with the word of God and it will be in their spirits. In difficult times, no matter where they are, or what they are undergoing, they will automatically release and stand firm upon the word of God. They should attend Sunday schools, where they will also be taught the word of God, about baptism and about the Church.

My reaction to members of the family who have no faith, is to pray for them so that they will receive the gift of faith. Christmas could be the best time, the Church could use it to strengthen the growth of faith in families, since that is the time most members of the family come together to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the head of the Christian family. This could be done by members of the family looking back and testifying about what the Lord has done for them, thereby strengthening the faith of other members of the family,

## The Good Old Godly Days

It is high time we looked at the minutes of the past, thus enabling us to do today's work well and work for the future.

I am sure that many would agree with me that our own days as elders (now in our 50s and above) were better good old godly days. In Sierra Leone, decades ago – perhaps true in many other countries – we had golden godly opportunities. Going to church as a kid in many homes was a matter of "must". Attendance at children's Sunday School was compulsory. Chewing gum in church – always distracting – was forbidden. Dresses that revealed one's vital statistics in church was seen as sin to both God and man. Papa and Mama, joining you going to Sunday services, walking together with Bibles and hymnals clasped in everyone's hands was real fashion. Papa and Mama, anxious to know from us what we learnt from the children's Sunday School, was a routine each Sunday after church. Being back in church, apart from Sunday, for children's class, was a habit. These were the minutes of the past.

Today's agenda seemingly does not have such items. They are branded archaic, old-fashioned, by today's mothers and fathers.

Why? Secularism, materialism and some aspects of modernism, and, in Sierra Leone, abject poverty, are gradually eroding the good old, godly days' culture, that have made us what we are today. In some homes today, children have the option to go to church or not. If, mistakenly, Papa or Mama is in church, it is

Christmas Day or New Year, or Easter Day or a funeral or wedding. Nobody is asked what he or she learnt at the children's Sunday school. In fact, some kids would complacently sit with Papa and Mama in church when it is time for Sunday School. Many see holding Bibles in the hand as old-fashioned, or are ashamed to publicly hold the Bible. Mid-week services, Holy Days, are functions for the aged.

In Sierra Leone today, abject poverty, apart from the trickling down of modernism, is drifting many young people away from church. We are all trying to make ends meet, to the extent that we let God out of our hustling and bustling. We work every day. When it is time for evening services, that is the time we would be packeting water or ginger beer, or making cakes to be sold the next day. As for the kids, there is no time to rest too. No time for evening church programmes, as we overwork them fetching water for us, or selling kerosine by the pint in the neighbourhood.

I am an "oldy", yet I strongly advocate that we need to hold on to the old, godly tradition and blend it with the better, current, godly tradition. Therefore I conclude by reminding us of the hymn:

Ring out the old, ring in the new.

The old tradition that is not good we leave out, but that is good we bring in.

## TANZANIA

Tanzanian village life is mostly built upon the ways of our ancestors passed on to each new generation. Some villages are Moslem-dominated and a few tribes follow traditional religions. As most families are extended, coupled with intermarriage, one wouldn't be surprised to find a multi-faith family. Families are living in a time of rapid change: children are affected by many factors like education, policies, media and society. However, parents are responsible for the holistic development of their children; they should realise the bad influence that they themselves may have on the family.

In Tanzania, parents usually prepare their infants for baptism, encourage children to attend church services with them, children's Sunday School, and confirmation classes. They also see that their children give time for church duties and activities. Some parents attend church and Mothers' Union programmes that help with family life. Faith in families is celebrated by prayers, which are usually observed before meals and at night before sleeping: the presence of all family members is appreciated. During special occasions like baptism, confirmation, weddings and funerals, friends and relatives are involved irrespective of their faith. Everybody is free to attend church services, and the celebration at home will include saying prayers, the word of God, singing hymns and choruses. People of other faiths would listen and some would even join in the singing with respect.

The Church and the Mothers' Union deal with family issues by various means such as meetings, seminars and workshops. There are small-scale development projects that operate at family level to raise the standard of living, and leaders

visit families with problems and give them support through prayers, consultation and sometimes material. There is also co-operation between the Church and Government departments and institutions which deal with family matters. The Church sometimes makes an official statement to strengthen and support family life. However, the Church should encourage the establishment of counselling centres, continue tirelessly to preach against undesirable practices that affect family life, and should equip lay people so that they play an active role in bringing salvation to families.

In Tanzania, some of us very painfully see our children turning to be drug addicts to the advantage of a few greedy people; some become street children because they are victims of modern development; some literature encourages our children to be irreligious and irresponsible. Children are also missing important components that constitute to humanity because parenting is mostly taken care of by one parent. Children's rights, too, make some parents sometimes submit to their children. The list is endless – no wonder some children are bold enough to wear their trousers inside out!

Proverbs 22:6 tells us to train our children in the way they should go and even if they are old they will not depart from it. God, in a miraculous way, cares for his creatures. St Monica's faith helped in the transformation of her son into St Augustine of Hippo.

## UGANDA

There are a lot of challenges as a result of the fast-changing multi-faith and secular society. In Uganda, many people are Christians. However, some are losing faith in Christianity and many are nominal Christians who only go to church on occasion.

There also exist so many different Christian sects and denominations springing up, including cults. This has in a way affected development of faith in Christian families. The most recent was a cult known as "Restoration for the Ten Commandments" that advocated the end of the world by 2000. They sold property belonging to the believers and eventually over 500 committed suicide when they set themselves aflame in a church building. Later on over 500 bodies were discovered in different mass graves, bringing the total of deaths to over 1000. This has been a big blow to the faith. Some secular people have taken this example to ridicule Christianity thus greatly wavering the faith of some Christian families. Because of the secular society fast growing, parents now find it very difficult to teach their children about the faith and the Church. The best way is to start bringing children very early to the faith. Besides, parents must teach them with examples i.e. point out the disadvantages of not following Christianity. The parents themselves must also become good examples and a model for the children to emulate i.e. they must be practical in their faith.

Many Christian families celebrate their faiths in different ways. While there are some who take their prayers seriously in their families, praying every morning together; praying while in difficult situations and also remembering to pray and have thanksgiving for all the good things they receive; i.e. healings, promotions, etc; there are many families who only pray on Sundays.

Baptism is a very common practice in Uganda. All Christian families make efforts to baptise their children. Other families mark it by organising parties. Some go for the baptism service and that marks the end. In Kitgum Diocese, the priests insist that proper instructions take place before baptism. In the majority of homes, the fathers mostly leave the instruction for the mothers to attend.

Christmas is widely celebrated in Uganda. Amusingly, even non-Christians like Moslems and pagans join in the festivities. It is a time when many people

who work away from home, come back to join with others for the celebrations. The celebration takes different forms. However, it is always characterised by the purchase of new clothes for family members, parties etc. Economically disadvantaged groups start preparation well ahead of time, doing casual work for cash. Churches also get actively involved. Choirs sing carols from door to door and at hospitals. Music and drama depicting the Christmas theme are also staged.

It is, however, sad to note that some people celebrate without taking seriously the meaning of Christmas. In some villages, violence always crowns the day, when people lose their lives. But despite the secular way of celebration, it is worth noting that many Christian families take Christmas to evaluate their Christian walk of life in the year and to plan for the future.

Christianity is perceived in many ways. Some family members follow the Agape form of love i.e. they love their neighbour irrespective of all shortcomings because of the love that God showed to us through Jesus Christ. There are some families who completely disassociate themselves from the non-believers.

The Province of the Church of Uganda is doing a lot to strengthen the growth of faith within families, through their different organs like mission and evangelism, education and youth work, Mothers' Union planning, development and rehabilitation. This advocates for holistic development so that the body, which keeps the soul, is also catered for. This is done through the support of different projects. In Kitgum, these range from small income-generating activities, relief food items for people displaced by the insurgency, to building a primary school in support of the Government policy of universal primary education.

The Mothers' Union that concerns itself basically with the well being of families' lives, based on the teaching of Christ, is also doing a lot. We hold seminars for girls, house fellowships and many other activities.

In the Diocese of Kitgum, the Anglicans have joined hands with other religious leaders to form Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative in an attempt to bring peace in the region, starting from individuals within families.

Faith is something loosely talked about until we have been challenged to exercise real faith in our own lives. I personally doubt that most of us understand faith in its Biblical context. Faith in the Biblical context moves mountains, heals the sick and even raises the dead. The reality of this kind of faith became very real to myself and my family in late 1990.

One of four daughters, I was born and grew up in a prosperous, peaceful nation in the heart of Africa. Two of my own children were in boarding school, I had a nice house and other company facilities. Although times grew increasingly worse in my homeland, bringing with it deep poverty, disease and high unemployment, I continued to prosper in a well-paid position. I had many friends and a secure future after 17 years of service. I was also the family's breadwinner, caring for my mother, father and some siblings. Suffering was all around me, yet our family was quite comfortable.

In every faith walk with the living God, there is a crisis that tests our faith. It was so with Peter as he walked on the water, and it was so with me when the Lord called me to serve Him in full-time ministry. His call was to minister to the dying in the ill-equipped hospital wards, and to bring the message of the Gospel and food to the starving in the outermost regions of the nation that we call the rural area or simply "the bush".

His word to me was to leave everything behind, not looking back but ahead to what He had for me. His promise was that He would provide for us day by day. When I gave my life to Jesus at Easter of 1987 after a dramatic encounter with the

Living Lord, I committed my life to God and promised Him that I would do whatever He called me to do without retreat, whatever the cost. So I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I was being called from the company I had worked for these past 17 years. The hardest part of my decision was not concern over myself, but for my children and my family.

All of my friends accused me of madness when I resigned my position. My company even offered me a better position with more salary, saying they could do more for me than God.

When I moved from my home, my sister took us into hers. When I rode the bus for seven hours and walked four more to get to the villages to minister to the people, I was carried on angelic tyres over rutted roads, although I often found myself with swollen feet.

Never once has the Lord failed to provide for all of our needs. The times of testing, fasting and prayer have strengthened all of the family, especially my children who were able to continue and complete their education.

To date I still live with my sister, mother and seven additional family members who have themselves experienced the hard times in our country. God has, does and will continue to provide for us all. The promises of God are sure. We must trust that He will meet our needs and step out in faith to meet Him on the waters in our lives.

## CHINA

Christmas in China is not a national holiday or one of the Chinese traditional festivals, but it is becoming a popular addition to the annual calendar of festivals. The Chinese have become more and more curious about the outside world and, as standards of living increase, they are eager to adopt traditions from the West, especially those which equate with fun and celebrations. Obviously commercial interests have promoted the secular side of Christmas, with a boom in sales of Christmas decorations, cards, gifts, etc. and for many foreign teachers coming to China this has been a disheartening revelation. However, one benefit of this new trend is a wide-spread interest among the Chinese to find out more about the origins of this festival, and where better to find out than in church?

In many towns and cities there is at least one church building. The church in Nanping is lively and active all year round, but as Christmas approaches extra services and activities are scheduled in anticipation of the hundreds of people curious enough to drop in to find out just what Christmas is all about. The Christmas Eve service is more like a variety show, with various groups attached to the church giving performances. Last time in Nanping these included the kindergarten, the brass band, the Sunday School, the women's choir, the old people's home, and because

we attend the services, the foreign teachers. The pastor begins the service with a short but very clear message of the meaning of Christmas to Christians, then the service continues for a couple of hours or more, drawing huge crowds.

(In some cities it is necessary to get a ticket!) There is always a Christmas tree in our church, but with Chinese characteristics: instead of decorations there are hundreds of red envelopes, each containing money. This is derived from the custom of giving such envelopes

to young family members at Chinese New Year – the difference is that the ones on the tree are then used by the church for charitable purposes.

Our students often assume that Christmas in Britain is just like Chinese New Year, or Thanksgiving in the US. We point out that while there are similarities, the origin of Christmas is rather different. As China opens more to the outside world, it is becoming easier to discuss things like this both in and out of class.

There are, of course, plenty of misconceptions to deal with. Is Santa Claus Jesus? Then there is confusion over Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year. This may sound surprising, but coming from a western country it is often difficult to imagine young people who have never heard or seen the Christmas story, so embedded is it in our consciousness. There is something refreshing about this, and telling the story here brings it alive to us in a way which may not be possible at home where the hype begins in September.



Article obtained courtesy of USPG (United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel)

## AUSTRALIA

Australia is a wonderful country in which to live. I am conscious that I, like many Australians of my age, have taken much for granted – our beautiful and diverse landscape, our plentiful supply of good food, our freedom and our faith. Most of us were born into communities which were predominately Christian, where baptism, Sunday School, attendance at worship with some regularity and confirmation formed parts of our rites of passage. However, this is no longer the case. Australia is now a multi-cultural, multi-faith country where membership of the Christian Church just does not automatically happen. Australians are now having to question their faith, learn more about why they believe what they do, and – more importantly – learn to share this faith with others.

On the whole, Australian Anglicans have not been used to talking about their faith, but now realise that if this faith is to be passed on to future generations, they must be prepared to talk about their

beliefs and invite others to join them in worship. Many parishes are running short courses which are helping people to learn, share and discuss their faith, and these are giving Anglicans confidence to talk about their beliefs. Such courses also help to build Christian community which provides friendship and encouragement.

As well as taking our faith for granted, in the past many Australians have also relied on schools and church organisations to teach the basics of Christianity. This no longer happens to the extent it used to, nor does society as a whole celebrate the major Christian festivals in conjunction with the Church. Parents are realising that the responsibility of teaching and practising the faith is theirs and the Anglican Church needs to help, support and encourage them in this.

This year, MU Australia, part of the worldwide Mothers' Union, has begun to do something about this. In my role as the Australian Co-ordinator of the Prayer and Spirituality Department, and with the assistance of our Publications Manager, I have produced some "Little Liturgies" to help worshipping families with young children and as an outreach to young families on the fringe of the Church.

These "Little Liturgies" come as a set of six colourful, user-friendly cards, each containing a simple liturgy to be used during a celebratory meal. The six cards cover birthdays, baptismal and wedding anniversaries, a visit to grandparents, Easter and Advent/Christmas. They provide an opportunity for parents and children (if they are old enough) to take part in the preparation and offering of

worship. The cards are available for a very low cost (just \$1.Aus. for the set), so they are accessible to low income earners and for parishes to buy in bulk for distribution.

The intention of this resource is to assist young families to bring an awareness of Jesus into significant events of family life, thus providing opportunities to talk about the faith as baptism and the major festivals are celebrated, and to encourage thanks for growth, family and our Christian heritage.



## UK

Some years ago I was at a Religious Education conference where an education inspector was describing a project developed in her area that involved creating a faith dimension in the home corner of infant school classrooms. She described how it has been quite straightforward to create a 'Jewish' home, a 'Muslim' home and a 'Hindu' home and provide items for the children to look at, talk about and use in role play. "But", she said, "how do Christians in Britain practise their faith at home in ways that are accessible to their children?"

In the Diocese of Ely over the last three years, a small group of people have worked on producing a book of ideas to try and help Christian families find ways to explore faith at home, establish meaningful patterns of prayer with their children and think about the practice of faith in the context of ordinary everyday life. Those responsible for creating the ideas all brought the experience of their own family life in a Christian context, but another interesting stimulus was provided initially by the Diocesan Bishop who had become interested in the description of customs in the English church on the eve of the Reformation. As I wrote the eventual text of what became *The 'E' Book, Essential Prayers and Activities for Faith at Home*, I found this history of earlier customs a useful stimulus to creativity.

In creating *The 'E' Book* we were determined to provide ideas that were workable and easily accessible. We spent a good deal of time thinking about what we had done with our children, but also what families really do in England as we know it today. We realised, for example, that collectables are terribly important – not only toys, but magazine volumes and so on – and one idea, abandoned because on a practical level it was way beyond our resources, was to provide collectable prayer activity ideas on a monthly or quarterly basis. The final outcome is a book

with a collection of 50 ideas and an extra six chapters with advice and collections of well-known simple prayers for a variety of occasions. The ideas take a family from the New Year through to the following Christmas with activity suggestions for a variety of Christian festivals and other special days spread throughout the year. Clearly Christmas and Easter are particularly rich, but equally there are eight ideas for July and August when adults often try to make more time for their children in the long school holiday.

All the ideas are very practical, based in 'doing' which will lead to conversation and questions and thence into prayer and sometimes a Biblical exploration. One of my favourites is the idea for St Martin's Day (possibly because it's not so well known and I love the illustrator's picture which shows two people, each wearing half a coat!). In tradition, Martin of Tours is remembered particularly for sharing his cloak with a beggar. The suggestion for the day is for a family to sort through outgrown clothes and find someone to give them to, and tell the story of St Martin as they are working. Finally there is the opportunity to hear the words of Jesus recounted in Matthew 25, "I was hungry and you fed me...naked and you clothed me..." Another less than obvious possibility is to brighten up a supermarket shopping trip by exploring ideas associated with loaves and fishes. Having disclosed two ideas, this still leaves another 48 to explore...

*The 'E' Book: Essential Prayers and Activities for Faith at Home* by Gill Ambrose was published by National Society/Church House Publishing in June 2000 at £9.95. ISBN 0 7151 4937 7



### Tots on Tuesdays

One of the highlights of the week for me, is helping to lead a Parent and Toddler group in the Parish Centre situated alongside the Parish Church of St. Paul, Sketty, Swansea. When the group was first started, (about six years ago), the Vicar and leaders expressed the wish that the morning's activities should start with a service. Working with pre-school children and their parents was seen to be part of our outreach into the community and it was considered that this was one way of communicating the Good News to the young families.

But how does one do this with under - three-year olds who find it very difficult to be still for two seconds? The parents and children are met and welcomed. (For obvious reasons, sliding doors partition off the toys and table-top activities at this stage!) There is a rota of people, (including the Vicar), who lead the services each week. Material selected helps the children (and parents) find out about themselves, their relationships and their environment. The service starts with one or two action songs which portray the Christian message, and these are followed by story-time. Puppets and other visual aids are well used in the telling of Bible and other stories, usually based on a theme. Further singing,

accompanied by the enthusiastic (if rather noisy) playing of musical instruments is a must. (Luckily we have a pianist who keeps us on track!) The service concludes with prayer.

In our planning we are mindful that young children learn more from the way things are done and from the people with whom they interact than from the teaching content. It is hoped that, through the teaching, the fun, the care and the friendliness of those they meet, toddlers and their parents come to learn more of the love of God.

### **Past Watchful Dragons: The Use of Children's fiction in communicating the faith.**

C.S. Lewis, theologian, scholar and children's writer, once wrote that the purpose of his Narnia stories was to get the Christian story past the "watchful dragons" of over-familiarity and false preconceptions, straight to a child's imagination. This could achieve a kind of "baptism of the imagination" which could be a precursor of true belief.

Accordingly, in the Narnia stories, the great mysteries of the Christian faith are imagined as occurring in a parallel universe to ours. *The Magician's Nephew* deals with the creation of the Narnian universe by Aslan, the great lion which is the Christ figure of the series. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* describes His death and resurrection. The next four books show the way in which the inhabitants of Narnia try to hold true to Aslan's teaching and *The Last Battle* is about the end of Narnia and the day of judgement.

In each book, human children find their way into Narnia by magic and their adventures there teach them the value of courage, loyalty and compassion. In some parts the Gospel parallels are close: at the end of one book the children are sailing through a sea of lilies at the edge of the world (Narnia is flat not round) when a lamb calls them to come and have breakfast and they gradually realise that it is Aslan (John:21). Sometimes details of the stories are changed; after Edmund has betrayed Aslan, unlike Judas, he repents after the resurrection and is forgiven.

A child reader or listener automatically identifies with the human children, becoming a passionate supporter of Aslan, without necessarily realising that what moves them so deeply is the greatest story ever told. Imaginatively and emotionally they become soil in which the seed can be sown and flourish.

### **A cross-cultural dimension**

In an increasingly secular "post modern" age, in which both Christian faith and family values are constantly undermined and devalued, it is a joy to be able to celebrate and focus again on the role and significance of faith in the family.

The sense of unity which transcends racial, cultural and denominational barriers is something which I have experienced first-hand and learned to value greatly. Born of Anglo-Egyptian parents, my experience of faith in an inter-denominational, cross-cultural setting has been enriching and a source of great blessing to me. As we approach Advent, I think back fondly to my childhood in Egypt. Christmas was always a particular joy, since it was a time when the whole family would worship together at the Anglican cathedral in Cairo on 25th December. As my father is originally from the Coptic Church, the Coptic/Orthodox Christmas on 7th January would never go unmarked either – sometimes resulting in two Christmas dinners and a second instalment of presents from Egyptian family members!

In simple ways I learned to value different Christian practices as my parents shared and demonstrated their faith in our daily lives together. I learned that God's

Church is big and strong enough to incorporate and contain a diversity of Christian practices, and that what really matters is not the way in which we worship, but rather the object of our worship. In learning to put Christ at the centre of our lives, it has been possible for my family to overcome the difficulties and differences which can so often lead to division and to the distortion of God's model of a family.

My experience of faith in a cross-cultural situation has left me with the strong conviction that peace and unity are possible when the foundations of our life together are rooted in Christ. Sadly, for so many, this Christmas will be remembered, not for the opportunity to demonstrate faith and unity as one large Christian family, but rather for the continuation of strife and division. As we celebrate and encourage the practice of faith in the family, it is my prayer that Christian families will become a prophetic sign in the 21st century of what God can do in the lives of those who put prejudice and division aside and accept His gift of adoption into His eternal family.

The Jesuits say "Give me a child for seven years and I'll show you the man" and we know that early experiences influence the person we can become. So what our children learn at home within the family is going to affect their whole attitude and approach to life. Our influence on a developing child is considerable and thus whatever they experience about "faith" as a child will help or hinder their developing faith and spirituality.

Another much used saying is "Faith is caught not taught" so example and our own approach to God will encourage the child's awareness of their own relationship with Him.

I still have a postcard stuck on my wall with the following written on it:

"If Children live with criticism, they learn to condemn

If Children live with hostility, they learn to fight

If Children live with ridicule, they learn to be shy

If Children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty

If Children live with tolerance, they learn to be patient

If Children live with encouragement, they learn confidence

If Children live with praise, they learn to appreciate

If Children live with fairness, they learn justice

If Children live with security, they learn to have faith

If Children live with approval, they learn to like themselves

If Children live with acceptance and friendship,

They learn to find love in the world..."

A new baby in the family is an opportunity to rediscover faith for everyone. Old habits can be changed for new ways of approaching God. New routines can begin for everyone in the family. The embarrassment that adults can experience about praying together disappears when they begin praying with their new baby. Praying as a family can start before a baby is born, and new-born babes can benefit from a time of peace and prayer beside the cot, giving everyone the chance to thank God for their part in the family. As the new baby grows, so can the time for developing a relationship with God increase for everyone involved.

Simple "Thank you" and "Sorries" can develop into requests and intercessions. "Grace" at mealtimes may not be said but this is the chance to re-instate or start afresh.

I remember being a little shocked at the familiarity my daughter had in her prayers when aged three. "Now look here Jesus I've already told you about my friend being ill." She has always been very direct and "called a spade a spade" and I learnt a lot from her because she was so natural and

had expectations that I hardly dared to have! We had started with the same prayers repeated each day but she was the one that moved on to a more personal relationship with God. After all, she'd been told he was her friend! She kept photos of Granny and Grandpa and other relatives beside her bed and would pick them up and include them in her prayers. When they died those photos helped her through her grief.

## USA

In the United States, there is much Good News when it comes to Faith in the Family. As the position religion plays in public life diminishes, and journalists believe that their credentials are enhanced by putting down almost everything they report, families are reacting by choosing to spend more time together – as families.

Parents of young children are taking a significantly larger role in the lives of their children than their parents did in theirs. From the time the infant is born, the father is as likely to be the one to jump up and care for the child when it cries as is the mother. And having spent such quality time with the infant, both parents are more likely to spend quality time with the child as it grows. This quality time enables the child to "watch" what the parents believe.

In 1979, The Episcopal Church in the United States approved a prayer book with an exciting understanding of children's place in the worship life of the church. The Sacrament of Holy Baptism is now considered "full initiation" into the church. Now, even infants are welcome in the service of Holy Communion in most Episcopal churches. So these children are "watching" and participating in what the

body of Christ does when it comes together.

Young parents, whose own parents had very separate schedules from those of the children, are choosing to make time to be together as a family. Many are building the family dinner hour back into their schedules. They are discovering that dinner – at a table – the television turned off – creates situations in which the real questions get asked and the faith of the family receives clear focus. These families are making dates with each other – guarding an evening a week, at least, to be together. They are reading stories from the Bible together or even playing a board game. And they are doing it together.

In addition to a decorated tree for Christmas, they probably have an Advent wreath (four candles in a wreath of greens) and light one candle the first Sunday of Advent, two the second, and so on, providing opportunities to talk about "waiting for Jesus." Many will have a nativity scene providing yet another opportunity to talk together about the coming of Christ.

Lent provides another opportunity to look at the way they are living their lives – and consider some corrections. One

family decided that in Lent they would simply forgo purchases of items they did not need. Even the youngest child took this quite seriously, sighing, perhaps, but agreeing that he did not really need that toy in the store!

Many families regularly take opportunities to pray together. Most will say a blessing over their food, and many have time at the end of the day to bring their sorrows and their thanksgivings to God. But more are looking for opportunities to pray together for those they are worried about because they are sick, for those they love who live far away.

More families are intentionally making connections with other families so their children can interact on a regular basis with other believing families. Most families live far away from their own families, so fill the void in this way.

There is Good News in many families in the United States as they grow in their faith, together.

# PARAGUAY

We are seeing how many homes and families are experiencing a restoration in their relationships at this time, as a result of reading the Bible and giving a place and space to God in their lives. These terms might appear very 'religious', but we cannot put it down to anything else, as these are the facts. When we look once more at Genesis 2:24, we see there the plan, the purpose of God for the family.

For many years our experience as the Church in Paraguay was, and in some cases continues to be, that evangelism is centred on the individual and not on all the family. As a result of this situation, in the last three years we have re-examined the focus of our evangelism and we have come to the conclusion that we should go back to focusing our thrust on the home and the family.

As a result of this 'new' focus, we see that many homes are experiencing the return of the values of the kingdom of God in their daily life, the consequence of a relationship with Jesus Christ in the personal and family experience. This implies an attitude of respect and equality between the parents and towards the children. These attitudes in the family facilitate healthy and helpful relationships which foment growth and development not only in the members but also in the family.

Inside this framework of respect and treating each other as equals, the commitment to the spiritual growth of the children in the family means seeking

to respect the individuality of each member and also seeking agreement in the understanding of duties and functions. The Apostle Paul describes clearly and fully these functions and duties in his letter to the Ephesians, in Chap 5:21 to Chap 6:4. So what happens when we live out these principles?

- We enjoy the presence of God in the family in the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.
- The parents take their proper place and responsibility in the family, devoting themselves to the upbringing of their children, inside a framework of love and respect.

We thank God that in many homes and families of Latin America and here in Paraguay, they are benefiting from this understanding. Without doubt, those who benefit most from all this are the children. As they see their parents giving time to reading the Bible and praying, they are motivated and encouraged. In this way, the parents are returning to the beautiful picture in Deut.6:1-2, in which the parents pass on their children, and to the children of their children, the Lord's commands and decrees.

*Translated by Jean Marshall, SAMS.*

## PRAYER FOR FAMILIES

Loving God, Father of all, we praise you for the gift of family life.

Uphold us and keep us faithful  
In our different relationships –  
married or single,

brother, sister, parent, child.

Be with us in the joys and struggles  
of family life.

Grant us grace to make our faith  
in the power and presence of Christ  
the very centre of our loves and  
hopes;

so may our family lives be blessed  
from generation to generation,  
and be of blessing to others.

Amen.

## NEXT NEWSLETTER

The Family Network's next newsletter, following the Easter issue on **Education and the Family**, will be on the theme of **Children and War**.

There is evidence that, in some countries, children are being recruited as soldiers in a way unknown to previous generations. What effect does this have on them and their families? What can be done by Christians and others to help prevent such horrors and rehabilitate those affected? How can child soldiers adjust back to a normal life?

In many parts of the world, children, even though not acting as soldiers, are the main victims of war, whether through poverty, homelessness, loss of a limb or the loss of parents.

We want to learn more about such situations and about work being done to help children affected by war. Please send articles (300 -500 words), or information about people or projects to contact, to the IAFN office by the beginning of March 2001.

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