



NSW.ACT

A Framework for Family Ministry: Statement of Principles

*This statement was adopted by the 1997 Synod in Resolution
282/97S as a basis for family ministry*

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Introduction

The synod offers the following statement of principles of family ministry as a framework for understanding families and their needs and developing family ministry. The Synod also acknowledges the useful and effective family ministry which is already being undertaken in many parts of the synod, and the range of material already available within the church to help parishes develop family ministry strategies. Synod encourages all parishes to make use of material on family ministry strategies available through the Board of Education, Burnside, and the Joint Board of Christian Education.

The role of the church

The church can play many roles in family life. It can be a place where all types of family groupings are welcomed and find understanding, acceptance and support. It can be a community to celebrate families in their strengths and successes and to support families when they face difficulties or breakdown. It can help children, adolescents and adults to reflect on their experience of family life, and to develop an understanding of how to live together responsibly.

All churches play a role in family life. Every member of every congregation has some experience of family life. What we do and say, or fail to do or say, as a congregation, through our liturgy, preaching, prayer, Bible study, and our programs, affects the way people handle their experience of family life.

Family ministry should not be intrusive, but it should be intentional. That is, the church should offer appropriate ministry and resources, while respecting people's right to privacy.

If we reflect faithfully and honestly on the pain and joy and variety of family relationships, we can open up opportunities for members of our churches to share their pain and joy in family relationships.

If we have a realistic understanding of families, we can offer support to families so that they do not have to fulfil their role in isolation, nor face crises on their own.

If as a church we romanticise family life, we leave many people unable to make sense of their own families, because our religious ideas and ideals do not connect with their experience.

If as a church we acknowledge that family violence occurs, we free people to tell us their experience of family violence - they will "break the silence" if we do.

If as a church we accept the variety of family life, we enable people to participate in our church life, by being open to people in their situation, and giving them the feeling that they belong.

In order to fulfil this family ministry, the church needs to take account of the following principles.

Theological perspectives on family ministry

Principle 1 Family is one of the contexts of Christian discipleship

For Christians, family is one of the contexts in which we live as Christian disciples in response to God's love and forgiveness. Christian values such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5: 22-3) contribute to healthy family life. The church will encourage family life based on Christian values as part of encouraging Christians in their discipleship. However, the church will also reach out to families beyond the church and offer them the ministry set out in this statement.

Principle 2 Family ministry will be faithful to the whole Biblical message about families

In using the Bible to illuminate family life, the church has a responsibility to use recognised methods. (Basis of Union #11). This will involve: understanding particular texts in context; learning from the stories about real families in Biblical times; being honest about the different meanings of "family" in the Bible; following the biblical example of being realistic about the problems and dangers of family life, as well as offering insight into the potential of family life for love and nurture; offering families help for the journey as a family, rather than imposing on families unattainable ideals about family life; talking about "Christian values" rather than "family values"; and recognising that the family roles of men, women and children are only one part of human life and Christian discipleship.

Principle 3 Family ministry will express the Grace of God

"In Jesus Christ, 'God was reconciling the world to himself' (1 Corinthians 5:19 RSV). In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's sin. Jesus of Nazareth announced the sovereign grace of God whereby the poor in spirit could receive God's love" (Basis of Union #3). "Christ... is the Word of God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist" (Basis of Union #4).

The church is called to cooperate with God in mission in the world. This involves first and foremost the proclamation of God's grace and forgiveness through the work of Jesus Christ. In its family ministry, as in all other aspects of ministry, the church is to be characterised by its offer of forgiveness and new beginnings, that is, by grace rather than law, and has a responsibility to relate this message to the brokenness of human relationships.

Principle 4 Family ministry will distinguish the future hope of the Reign of God from everyday living

The church awaits the coming of the Kingdom of God (Basis of Union, #1). That is, the church lives in "eschatological hope". The Church itself is a pilgrim people on the way towards a goal rather than a people who have reached a goal (Basis of Union #7), and is in constant need of reformation (Basis of Union #18). The church will therefore encourage families to be responsible, and to be growing in their capacity to care for one another, but will not impose on families unrealistic ideals.

Principle 5 Family ministry is being neighbour to families

In response to the second great commandment and the story of the Good Samaritan, the church has a role to play as neighbour to families. This includes a responsibility to affirm and strengthen all families, offering them resources available within the church and avoiding actions and policies which may damage families. This will range from family friendly worship and parish based pastoral care and training in parenting, and aged care services and support, to specialist counselling and support services such as Burnside and Unifam, and advocacy for social and economic justice and human rights.

The church is called to follow Christ's example in his telling of the story of the Good Samaritan, by affirming and encouraging all those in our society who act as neighbour by caring as "family" for others, whether or not there are legal or biological ties between them. The church has a responsibility not to dismiss caring people by labelling them on the basis of their unconventional relationships.

Principle 6 Family ministry recognises that family life depends on social justice

The Uniting Church has recognised that the Biblical tradition bears witness to a God who calls the community of faith to work for social justice (see, for example, Isaiah 1, 5 and 58, and Luke 1: 46-56). Social justice is a basic requirement for the survival of families. Ministry to families must recognise which families in Australian society are most vulnerable and most stressed by social and economic factors, and give them priority. The resolutions and ongoing

work of this synod in areas such as social justice strategy; housing; racism and multiculturalism; Aboriginal lands rights, native title and social justice; government provision of family and community services; unemployment; and environment are highly relevant to family life and wellbeing.

Principle 7 Commitment to human rights is essential to family ministry

All human beings are created in God's image and have inherent dignity. In response to God's love for all people and recognition of human dignity, the church is committed to human rights (eg Assembly statements to the nation 1977 and 1988; NSW Synod resolutions on unemployment 1992). The church, in contributing to public (government) policy, seeks policies which are consistent with the international covenants on human rights, including the international covenants on civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, the rights of the child, the eradication of racism, the ending of discrimination against women, and the draft covenant on the rights of indigenous peoples.

Principle 8 Cultural Inclusiveness is essential in family ministry

"The church is called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries" (Basis of Union #2). In the context of family ministry, this suggests that the church needs a broad awareness of the range of family relationships found in ethnic and social sub-cultures in Australia, and a willingness to work with those realities. "Family" takes on different meanings and has different possibilities depending on one's context.

Understanding the family

Principle 9 Family ministry respects people's own definition of family

Whether it is pastoral ministry or a community based ministry, family ministry needs to be based on people's own experience and definition of family. "Family" is, in the broadest sense, whoever people define to be *their* family. "Family" includes adults and the children for whom they are responsible, and, by extension, the other people who are biologically related to them. It includes these relationships through the various stages of life, as people pass through childhood, live as mature adults and grow old. However, in our society there are groupings of people who fulfil the role of family for one another, although there are not the formal ties of marriage or biological kinship, and who are considered by their members to be their family.

Principle 10 Family ministry will recognise that families are vital to children's healthy development

Children need a stable family life which, under normal circumstances, includes their own biological parents and siblings, and may also include, in some cultural traditions, other kin or non-relatives who have specific responsibilities in a child's rearing. However, marriages break down. Some families are dangerous. Family ministry will be based on a recognition that society has a responsibility to encourage and support parents in their responsibility for their children, to minimise those factors which contribute to family breakdown, to provide intervention where families are dangerous and to support other family groupings and arrangements in which children are raised.

Family ministry will take account of synod and assembly policy on children's ministry and the Uniting Church understanding of baptism, which recognises complementary roles for parents and congregation in nurturing children in the Christian faith.

Principle 11 Family ministry will recognise the needs of adults in families

Families also exist for the nurture and welfare of their adults members, whose needs are met through relationships with their partner and their other kin, including aging parents and adult children. The quality of these relationships can enhance or damage family life. Family ministry

will respond to the range of relationships and responsibilities in which adults are involved in families.

Older people are important members of families, with both contributions to offer and needs to be met. The church's ministry with the aging, and the synod's aged care policy, should include attention to the needs of older people in the context of their families.

Principle 12 Family ministry will recognise the reality of family violence

The resolution on family violence adopted by the 1991 synod (286/91S) is part of this family ministry policy. In summary, this resolution condemned all forms of family violence as a sin and, in many cases, a crime. Family violence betrays marriage and family, and has enormous personal and social costs. The church affirms the work of specialist agencies in supporting victims and seeking to prevent further violence. The church is to be a place where victims of family violence find understanding, support, healing and the strength to begin a new life. Perpetrators need to take responsibility for their actions.

Principle 13 Family ministry programs need to be soundly based

There are factors within family life which can enhance or damage the capacity of families to enable children to develop, and to meet the needs of their adult members. Family ministry programs, eg family support services, family, parental and life skills training, marriage preparation and marriage enrichment, should be based on a sound understanding of contemporary family relationships and the best available research on what contributes to healthy family life, as well as learning from families themselves.

Family friendly social policy and social institutions

Principle 14 Family ministry will advocate appropriate social policies

The right to establish and maintain a family is a fundamental human right. All institutions in society, businesses, government, community organisations, political parties and the church, have a responsibility to order their lives in ways which do not cause harm to families, and that, where possible, support and nurture families.

Families cannot meet all the needs of their members on their own. Families require adequate income to provide for their needs, and access to the services which their family members need, such as education, health, housing, income support and services in times of difficulty. This implies particular duties for both employers and government.

In assessing the adequacy and appropriateness of services provided for families through the public sector, the church will take as standard requirements that the system should be "user friendly" and embody the following characteristics: access, equity, simplicity, transparency, flexibility, adequacy, stability and certainty.

Principle 15 Family ministry will challenge those social attitudes that undermine family life.

The church should challenge those social factors and values which undermine people's capacity to care for one another and sustain permanent relationships. The values which should be challenged include individualism, materialism, the idea that children are just another commodity (or consumer choice), and the acceptance of violence and abuse.

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