

# *The Heart of the Matter*

This was the UnitingCare NSW.ACT response to the Discussion Paper *The heart of the matter* (National Council for the International Year of the Family 1994).



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## 1 Introduction

The Board for Social Responsibility is the arm of the NSW Synod of the Uniting Church mandated to contribute to the public policy formation process and to comment on social issues. It makes its comments in accordance with Synod policy, and is accountable to the Synod. The comments in this submission are based on a range of policy resolutions adopted by the Synod, and also take account of policy resolutions of the Assembly, the national council of the Uniting Church.

The Board for Social Responsibility offers the following submission in response to *The Heart of the Matter: Families at the Centre of Public Policy*. In preparing the submission we have maintained a similar approach to that taken in our submission to the Lyons Forum Inquiry into the Value of the Family in 1993. The NSW Synod is currently developing a Synod Family Policy which will cover many of the concerns raised in this submission. It is unfortunate that work is not sufficiently advanced for us to make a copy available. It will, like this submission, draw on already established policy and practice in the Uniting Church, seeking to provide a coherent framework for ministry with families and advocacy on behalf of families.

We believe that much of what we say in this submission is consistent with the approach taken by the National Council on the International Year of the Family in *The Heart of the Matter*.

It is significant that the Lyons Forum Inquiry began with the question of "how does the family contribute to the wealth and prosperity of the nation." It is symptomatic of the economic focus of both major political parties, and many economists, commentators, businesspeople and others in dealing with questions of public policy. We therefore believe that it is relevant to include in this submission the approach that we took in answer to that question. We suggested that in considering public policy in relation to families, there are two prior questions of definition to be addressed - what is the family? and what is wealth? How one deals with public policy in relation to families will be affected by these two definitions.

This submission deals mainly with the general framework for public policy about families. Burnside, a specialist agency of the Uniting Church, has also made a submission, based on its experience of working with families

language skills and paid employment. The Statement should not give the impression that all family practices are endorsed - public policy should recognise that family practices need to be measured against agreed standards of human rights.

A statement on Social Responsibility to Families will be irresponsible if it does not recognise the tension between family and society. The draft document appears to emphasise the rightness of family life, attitudes and values. Some of the proposed clauses need to be modified to make it clear that families have a responsibility to respect human rights of their members, and that governments have a responsibility to ensure that the human rights of all Australians are respected. The current proposed clauses offer some examples of this, but do not assert the basic principle clearly enough.

The responsibility of government should recognise that not all caring needs can or should be met by families. It should clearly distinguish between the normal caring work of families, which it is appropriate to support, and caring needs of family members which require alternative avenues of care - eg so that the special needs of elderly or disabled people are not left to individual families to fulfil, but are to some extent carried by the whole of society.

The charter should at some point recognise the responsibility of the childless towards those with children. There is a disturbing trend among DINKS (people with double incomes, no kids), exemplified earlier this year in some of the weekend newspaper magazines, to consider children a commodity, and to take the view that having children is a choice one makes from alternatives such as buying a bigger house or a new car. This perhaps underlies current taxation and support policies, whereby the taxation/income support system does not provide horizontal equity. The Statement of Social Responsibility will only work if there is recognition that society needs its children, its disabled and its elderly, and that we therefore all share the responsibility of care. Otherwise, the statement opens the way to fobbing off responsibility on individual families, and increasing inequity.

must also have a clear ethical framework. The statement as proposed seems to err on the side of idealism about families, and demanding too much responsibility of them, and also to err on the side of being pragmatic rather than ethical. Families end up with too much responsibility because of the idealism and the failure to examine the ethical principles which should undergird society's attitude and practice towards families. Given the multicultural and multi religious nature of Australian society, the ethical framework would come most appropriately from international human rights. The preamble to a Statement on Social Responsibility to Families should begin by recognising the nature of society, and the role and limits of families in society.

This theme should be carried through the document.

For example, paragraph 1 on page 82 appears to be saying that needs should be met in families, and that anything else is second best. As has been explained in some detail in this submission, such an approach can undermine public policy and leave many families, who cannot live up to such ideals, and many individuals, severely disadvantaged. The same problem occurs in later paragraphs - there is a need to acknowledge that public policy in support of families is a necessary but not sufficient element of public policy in terms of caring for people.

There needs to be an emphasis on the role of families in local communities and the role that local communities can play in supporting families. It is important to recognise that this must be a two way relationship if it is to be effective. Some of the stress on nuclear families comes when family units are isolated and without support - there is no one close by to turn to for advice or practical help. A strong local community life can provide such support, but that requires that families contribute to that life, instead of isolating themselves.

Any statement of Social Responsibility to Families needs to clearly recognise that there are appropriate spheres of responsibility for families, and appropriate spheres of responsibility for society as a whole. Family should not be seen as an alternative to a strong public sector with good income support and community services.

There is also a need to recognise that families sometimes reinforce attitudes and practices which are no longer acceptable, and that this is not acceptable in society. For example, in some cultures in Australia girls and women are still treated as subordinate, and denied equal access to education, English

and taking up more specific matters. There is some overlap between them, both being consistent with Uniting Church policy.

## 2 What is the family?

### 2.1 Definitions

UNIFAM, a marriage guidance and mediation agency of the Uniting Church has often commented in submissions on public policy, and in its communications with the church, that policy about the family needs to respond not only to the ideals of family life, but also to the actual family constellations which exist in Australian society. The Board endorses the comments of UNIFAM to the Lyons Forum in 1993:

...we regard 'family' as encompassing all cross-generational nurturing systems of goodwill. The word family also projects an image of an intimate, inter-dependent relationship involving one or more responsible adults who have the capacity to care for themselves and each other, to include dependent persons in the caring group and to provide for their varying needs. The dependents may be children (natural, adopted, orphaned, foster, step or of unknown parentage) and frail aged and handicapped persons unable to cope in certain areas of their lives without the wiser, stronger, more resourceful, more stable parenting entity.

We consider that it is important in regard to the terms of reference of the Lyons Forum to dispense with any legalistic, political, or religious definitions which discriminate against certain family constellations on the grounds of sexual preference, consanguinity, marital status, or eligibility for social security benefits. This is so that in the International Year of the Family all possible inter-cultural support is engendered for those who conscientiously care for others in an enduring association with them. (UNIFAM Submission to the Lyons Forum 1993.)

Similarly, the 1991 meeting of the NSW Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia defined 'family' as follows:

Family refers to the wide range of relationships: married couples; married couples with one or more children; single parents with one or more children; de facto relationships; separated families; 'blended families' where parents may have divorced and remarried and children may come from different parents; foster families and guardians. Family also includes the relatives of the people in these relationships, including grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins, in-laws and de facto equivalents.

In putting forward these definitions we are not questioning the importance of stable marriage for the care of children. The secular law and the Christian Church agree that, ideally, children are best cared for in stable marriage. Moira Eastman has argued an eloquent case for this ideal in her book *Family the Vital Factor*.

Our point, however, is that public policy should be based on where caring is actually being done, and should not be punitive toward other forms of family which nevertheless care for people. Australia should, in public policy, maximise the caring which occurs in households, not judge the arrangement by which it is done.

## **2.2 Definitions of family in the context of public policy**

The way 'family' is understood makes a significant difference to public policy formulation. Some people advocate policies which are supposedly "family based", but which deny the importance of parenting in non-traditional families.

It is important that public policies do not favour one type of family over another. For example, if policies seek to give one spouse in two parent, one income families the option of staying at home through mechanisms such as income splitting, then the same option should be available to sole parents with children of the same age, through appropriate mechanisms such as continuation of the sole parent benefit.

We reject the view that income support and other programs for non-traditional families encourages the break up of marriages or other problems. To base public policy on the view that problems can be avoided in traditional families if there is no support, or less support, for alternative families is naive and avoids facing the difficulties which exist in traditional families and lead to family breakdown.

## **7. Seeing the family in perspective**

Finally it is important that the value of the family be not made absolute. In the end, we are all part of humankind. Our responsibilities do not end at the bounds of our family group, however we define it. Australian families and Australian society cannot and must not be set over against one another in public policy - families need the broader framework of society, just as society needs families if people are to be cared for. Nor do our responsibilities end at our national shores. Australia is part of humankind, with responsibilities to Australia's indigenous people, on the one hand, and to less prosperous and well resourced nations on the other hand. The church believes that national policies must take account of international human rights, and that Australia's role in the world must be based not merely on our national self interest, but on an awareness of the needs and aspirations of the least developed nations. Those nations are made up of families too.

## **8 Responses to the particular matters raised in The Heart of the Matter**

The proposal for a National Statement of Social Responsibility to Families has much to commend it. However, there are at least two major dangers in the statement as proposed. The first is that it appears to make "the family" an absolute value. For example, it refers to families as "the foundation of society". This is an overstatement - they are one of the foundations of society, but certainly not the only foundation. It distorts the nature of society to suggest that families are the (one) foundation. Society also has to value individuals, not merely families. Society is based on some sense of social contract such as law, custom, human rights, etc. Families play an important role in the caring work of societies, but they are not what makes a society a society.

The second major problem is that the statement gives the overall impression of idealising the family. This may worsen some of the problems families encounter, by overemphasising family life and encouraging an unrealistic and romanticism idealism about families., which is not helpful to people in their family life (they feel they are failures if they do not live up to the ideal), or to public policy formation (which needs to be based on reality, not romanticism). Social Responsibility to Families must be firmly grounded in reality. It

It is imperative that native title, and in the reparation package which must be provided because the land was not *terra nullius*, are accepted by both major political parties. Only harm can come to Aboriginal people if they must live with the threat of agreements which have been negotiated with the current Government being changed unilaterally by future Governments. Similarly, only harm can come to Aboriginal families if there is confusion between the need for a social justice package as reparations or compensation for dispossession, and welfare needs which should be provided to all Australians, including Aboriginal people, as an entitlement as Australians.

## 6.2 Families in materialist culture

An emphasis on the value of family life raises questions about materialist culture. Families are pounded day in and day out by advertising which encourages family members to think only of themselves and their immediate needs, and to think of quality of life in terms of what they buy rather than the way they relate to one another. Again, there is a need for business ethics - advertising without ethics undermines the values which support family life and society generally.

## 6.3 Families which include a homosexual couple

UNIFAM's definition of family with which we began this submission is very broad. It recognised that there may be same sex relationships which need the same consideration in public policy as heterosexual families. There are, for example, many homosexual couples (men or women) who have parental responsibilities. For the sake of their children their needs as a caring group should be considered. There is need for consultation with the gay and lesbian people and organisations how their families are disadvantaged by current public policy and what effect this has on their capacity to care for their children and for other members of their families, such as people with AIDS, because of inadvertent or deliberate discrimination in the public areas of life. This could include issues like attitudes of hospitals when children or partners are sick, legal problems because of lack of recognition of the relationship, problems with medical insurance, attitudes of schools, other parents, and so on. These difficulties put an addition stress on these relationships and make their caring responsibilities particularly demanding. If the children and other dependents in such relationships (eg partners with AIDS) are to be adequately cared for then public policy must take account of their needs.

The Uniting Church would urge you to recognise the value of the caring and parenting done by all the caring units mentioned in the UNIFAM and NSW Synod definitions of family, and to ensure that all those who care for children, the elderly, or those dependent for some other reason, are recognised and supported by public policy without discrimination.

## 3 What is wealth?

There is a tendency in debate on public policy to define "wealth" very narrowly - as money, property, the goods and services which money can buy. The Uniting Church maintains that there are other forms of wealth. These have been defined in the 1988 paper of the church's Assembly Social Responsibility and Justice Committee. The key sections are reproduced here. One of the premises is that some of these forms of wealth come from God. Whether or not one believes in God, the fact is that some of these forms of wealth are "given", not made by human endeavour. The essential argument therefore remains valid.

### 3.1 Defining genuine wealth

Genuine wealth is not defined in monetary terms, but as those things which contribute to the well-being of humankind.

In order to discuss economic justice we need to think about the nature of wealth. It is unfortunate that the older meaning of the term, as that which brings wellbeing, has been replaced by the idea of wealth as financial assets, or wealth as the surplus above the average means of subsistence. Such narrow definitions mean that the wide variety of wealth which contributes to the wellbeing of people is ignored, with the result that the genuine wealth of the human race is placed at risk by the narrow focus of objectives to increase monetary wealth.

Genuine wealth takes the following forms:

- Individuality** - the human individual is valuable, with his or her separate characteristics, health, values, interests, spirituality, intellect and so on. Without individuals who are developing maturity appropriate to their age and situation, there can be no human community.
- Material wealth** - the satisfaction of basic human needs - food, housing, sanitation, education, health care. (This is expanded in

section 10)

**Technological/instrumental wealth** (a) the knowledge and skills which enable material wealth to be provided - the expertise of agricultural knowledge, engineering, medicine, and the skills which translate that knowledge into practice, (b) the labour force and (c) the physical machinery which comes from some of this knowledge and labour, and which is the means of providing goods and services (ie industrial plant, computer systems, transport vehicles etc).

**Resource wealth** - the raw materials which are used to provide material wealth -for example, land, sea, air, water, fossil fuels, ores, wood, sand, seed.

**Intellectual wealth** - the knowledge and wisdom which humankind has accumulated through the millennia, and has preserved and developed through such means as scholarly pursuit, communal discussion, literature, the arts, and community arts/stories . The wisdom by which a society and individuals are able to reflect on their life and values.

**Spiritual wealth** - personal and community spirituality, religions, and in some cases literature, the arts and community arts/stories etc. The ways in which human beings move beyond themselves to contact with the transcendent. Intellectual and spiritual wealth are often interconnected, since both involve awareness and reflection.

**Natural/ecological wealth** - the world as it is without human activity - its physical form, its plant and animal life, its ecosystems and gene pools. The world which we may modify, but which we did not create and cannot re-create. The world which is air, water, sunshine, land and life. The universe. Planet earth is highly vulnerable to destruction when we reduce it to resources to be used, instead of seeing it as a gift in its own right, to be valued, to be understood as an integrated whole, and to be tended lovingly.

**Social wealth** - relationships (families, communities, races, nations, international relationships) customs, laws, human rights, language, traditions. Our relationships with people and the things which bind us together.

**Political wealth, ie power** - participation in decision-making on matters which affect any or all other forms of wealth. Our capacity and right to make decisions and to organise. This form of wealth is often accumulated by institutions in ways which deprive individuals of their personal right to make decisions.

## 6 What other changes could be made in Australia which would advantage families?

We will leave it to specialist agencies such as UNIFAM and Burnside to address the specialist services needed by families and simply make the general comment that those services, such as marriage preparation, marriage guidance, mediation, family skills formation, community family support services and family counselling are still very poorly funded and cater for only a fraction of the families who need such help. However, we also wish to emphasise the broader issues. In particular, we urge the need to value the non-economic aspects of life. Families need time and space in which to function. They also need their cultural supports. They need an intellectual and spiritual life. However, they can only move beyond the economic dimensions of life when basic economic needs are met.

### 6.1 Aboriginal families

It is not for the church to speak in place of Aboriginal people. We assume that the National Council on the International Year of the Family will consult with Aboriginal communities about the needs of their families, and will write into its proposals for public policy a recognition that such consultation (in the proper sense of the word, ie learning from Aboriginal people) needs to be a permanent feature of public policy formation.

However, consultations and work with Aboriginal people over many years, suggest that the injustices to Aboriginal and Islander people have created difficulty for their family life. In addition, Aboriginal families have often been deliberately destroyed by removing the children and separating siblings from each other.

Some of these problems which exist for Aboriginal family life have been examined in reports such as those of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Affairs in New South Wales (around 1980-1982) and the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

The reports make it clear that to support Aboriginal families we need as a nation to rectify wrongs done in the past, to bring services to Aboriginal communities to the standards taken for granted by other Australians, and to provide an economic base and self-determination for Aboriginal communities.

enormous impact that this has on families -eg families who have invested in the companies in the expectation of providing for their future, or families who are clients and customers of business, who in some cases pay for goods and services which are never delivered or which do not meet adequate standards. Some families are let down by the business sector when they are enticed into purchase of goods and services which seem attractive at the time, but which involve costs and risks which they do not understand. Consumer protection laws play a crucial role in protecting the interests of families. However, there is also a need for better business ethics, which recognise that in the long run the business sector needs families, since an enormous amount of goods and services are consumed by families together. When some businesses are allowed to "rip people off", not only do families suffer, but so do other businesses which would have supplied their needs.

That is, public policy which seeks to meet the needs of families must recognise that both the public and the business sector can contribute to meeting the needs of families, and can also create problems for families. One is not good and the other bad. Families need public policy which takes realistic account of the strengths and weaknesses of both sectors.

### **5.10 Ecologically sustainable development**

Families need an ecologically sustainable economy. To take but one example, it is becoming increasingly obvious that many health problems are the result of environmental pollution - air pollution in the western suburbs, or beach and river pollution, lead to major health problems such as asthma. Not only are such illnesses bad for the individual, but they put heavy strains on family life, both financially and in terms of caring. While doctors and pharmaceutical companies may benefit, it is a form of "growth" which is bad for families and bad for other businesses, since families with high health bills have less to spend on other needs, and increased illness requires higher health expenditure in the public sector. In the end, it is best for both families and business if the need for health expenditure is reduced through healthier environment and healthier lifestyles.

It is important to distinguish between those institutions set up by society to exercise power on behalf of people (and which are accountable in some way to the electorate), and organisations which accumulate power through wealth or other means but are not accountable to the people.

**Variety** - diversity of life in all its forms; diversity of human beings - individuals, cultures.

**Creativity** - that which enables human beings to take the other forms of wealth and develop them in new ways.

**Time (leisure and work)** - the opportunity to utilise and enjoy the other forms of wealth.

Some of these forms of wealth are obviously the gift of God - natural wealth, resources wealth, the human creativity, intellect and ingenuity which underlie technological wealth and intellectual wealth, and the time that we are given to participate in life. Social wealth, spiritual wealth, and political wealth, also stem from our being made in the image of God.

Some forms of wealth are best described as the result of human development of what God gives to us. We do not create, for example, our human intellect, but our intellectual wealth does come from what people have developed by scholarship and community reflection. These forms of wealth are an outworking of God's creative activity in cooperation with human activity - in most cases communal activity. Individuals may make important contributions to these forms of wealth, but none operate in a vacuum, without drawing on the wealth of the community in order to make their contribution. Science and technology, for example, require that particular researchers build upon the ideas of those who have gone before or who work alongside them.

It is unfortunate that in recent times the meaning of "wealth" has been reduced from these genuine forms of wealth to "money". Money is not genuine wealth but a means of organising access to some forms of genuine wealth, in particular, to resources wealth, technical wealth, and material wealth, as well as to luxury goods and services. It is a means of organising ourselves which, at its best, takes account of the interdependence of people who may be distant from one another by providing a medium of exchange.

Money has no value in its own right. Countries with the highest GDP per capita are not necessarily those countries with the greatest amounts of genuine wealth, or the highest standard of living. Economic management needs to be evaluated in terms of efficiency in achieving proper social goals - the satisfaction of people's basic human needs with least destruction of those forms of wealth utilised in production of goods and services, and with maximum resources left for generation of other forms of genuine wealth - including intellectual, spiritual, social and political wealth.

### 3.2. Genuine material wealth

Genuine material wealth is neither money, nor luxurious goods and services. Humankind will be genuinely materially wealthy when everyone has access to the following goods and services at the level required to satisfy basic human needs.

The concept of material wealth is often misunderstood. Genuine material wealth is neither money, nor luxurious goods and services. Humankind will be genuinely materially wealthy when everyone has access to the following goods and services at the level required to satisfy basic human needs:

- Enough food, of appropriate composition and quality for people to satisfy essential daily requirements of energy, protein, vitamins etc. (Excess food and drink, leading to degenerative diseases, should be defined as destroying genuine wealth).
- Adequate housing appropriate to the household size, type and customary living style (ie lifestyles of different tribal and racial groups) and to the climate. It should, in some way, provide the basic facilities needed for cooking, sleeping, maintaining proper relationships, studying and recreation (especially where there are children who need room to play.)
- Sanitation and clean water within the immediate proximity of the house.
- Education which enables one to
  - become literate and numerate to a functional level, and to communicate effectively what one thinks or feels;
  - acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to function in daily commerce and society;
  - develop one's capacity to think, ie to evaluate facts and ideas, and to challenge false myths and propaganda;

needs simplifying, and suggest that a more adequate family allowance is one way of reducing the need for so many supplementary payments. We note that some of the changes to the social security system which were announced earlier this year are based on an awareness of the need to value work within families, but we suggest that the initial changes still leave much to be desired.

We also urge better income support for families with disabled members, especially those families who cannot afford to employ outside help. There are families where one spouse cares for a disabled member of the family full time, because there is no money to employ carers, yet if carers were employed it would require five full time carers (taking account of hours of work, holidays, etc). Such families live under enormous stress, shouldering an unfair and unhealthy burden, in the name of "the family". Where they manage to function, such situations reflect well on the compassion of the individuals involved, but reflect very poorly on the compassion of society as a whole. However, many people are harmed by such situations, and some families are destroyed because the burden is too great.

### 5.9 The value of the public sector in support of families

We believe that Australians value their public services, and that they are willing to pay the taxes which are necessary to provide such services. We view with concern the emphasis of both major political parties to undermine the taxation system by emphasising tax cuts, without at the same time explaining to people how our tax burden is low compared with that of other OECD countries, or what services the nation would have to do without if we moved to the taxation rates of Asian countries.

It is also important to recognise that many people struggle in "the market". The private sector is not unmitigated good. It can meet the needs of some families very well, but leaves other families distressed. For example, investment in the private sector carries considerable risks, and cannot be assumed to meet the needs of all families especially in matters like provision in case of accident, or superannuation. The increasing emphasis on superannuation rather than pensions for the aged is likely to leave some families in the future with heavy financial burdens because their parents' or grandparents' superannuation scheme has failed them. That is, those who advocate expanding the business sector at the expense of the public sector as a way of meeting the needs of families, have a responsibility to take seriously the failures of businesses and the

public sector. This includes matters such as education, health, the justice system, community and family services and so on. We believe that emphasis on independence and a smaller public sector results in additional burdens on particular groups in society, not in an overall increase in independence and responsibility. It also increases the strain on the community sector, including churches and charities, whose proper role is to supplement rather than substitute for adequate public services. This means that over-emphasis on families meeting the needs of their own members is not a responsible or efficient way of operating. It is often highly unjust.

We believe that the public sector plays an important role in meeting needs of families, both directly and indirectly, and that moves to a smaller public sector are likely to have the most severe effects on those families who are most in need. An important part of what families on low incomes need is adequate public services, paid for by a tax system which is progressive in its parts and progressive overall. This includes adequate income support.

### **5.8 Income support for families**

We draw attention to some of the overseas models examined in the discussion papers of the Social Security Review which was chaired by Bettina Cass, and in particular to those models which reduced the problem of poverty traps by providing generous tax transfers to families with dependent children. It is disturbing that in Australia, the concept of the family allowance as a tax transfer, introduced by the Fraser government, has been undermined for political reasons, and is now labelled as "welfare". The Family Allowance is a tax transfer which has the potential both to ensure horizontal equity within the tax system, and to ensure that the principal carer has access to the tax transfer which is intended for the support of children.

We would encourage all political parties to support family allowance payments at a level which more closely reflects the real costs of providing the basic needs of children. We would argue that a universal tax transfer to families with children is a helpful way of reducing the poverty traps which come from a "welfare" approach which is closely targeted to families on the basis of need. That is, if we provided adequate tax transfers to all families with children, we can avoid the disincentive effects of poverty traps and loss of income support which are said to exist for social security recipients who can only find low paid work. We note that there is a suggestion that the family payment system has become too complex and

- develop one's creativity; including the capacity for original thought;
  - understand and participate in one's culture;
  - develop wisdom.
- Basic health care:
  - adequate diet appropriate to the physical needs of the person;
  - adequate sanitation, clean water;
  - access to the medication required to treat ordinary illnesses and injuries (mass-produced medicines, simple surgical procedures, etc);
  - preventative health programs such as education and the elimination of health threatening problems eg malarial swamps;
  - adequate work, leisure and recreation;
  - dental care - fillings, extractions, false teeth;
- Appropriate help with basic personal and household chores when elderly, sick or disabled.
- Appropriate care and protection while a child.
- The basic transport and communication resources necessary to participate in society and have access to the other requirements listed here.
- Work which contributes to the genuine wealth of society.
- Clean air and an intact ecosystem which allows the cycle of life, death, decay and growth to continue, including maintaining healthy and unpolluted soil, air and water.

It should be noted that while all these matters are influenced by the economic system, not all of them can be produced by that system. For example, business can destroy, but not create, "clean air and an intact ecosystem which allows the cycle of life, death, decay and growth to continue, including maintaining healthy and unpolluted soil, air and water".

### **3.3 Measuring genuine wealth**

We draw your attention to the various indices which are now being developed to take account of the fact that GDP is an inadequate way of measuring the wealth of a nation. Such indices include the United Nations Human Development Index, but there are other indices which

take account of matters such as human rights and the health of the ecosystem. That is, this approach to wealth is being increasingly recognised as valid in discussions about how to compare national wealth.

The validity of this approach is also evident in facts such the following. Some countries, eg Sri Lanka have low GDP per capita but high life expectancy, while some other countries have far higher GDP per capita, but lower life expectancy. One can argue that life expectancy, rather than GDP per capita, is a measure of well-being.

The point of this discussion is to make it clear that the Board understands the Uniting Church position to be that the well-being of families and individuals cannot be adequately assessed from a narrow economic framework. Public policy will only succeed in supporting family life, internally and in its interaction with the rest of the community, when it recognises and supports these various dimensions of well-being.

#### **4. What role do families play in the life of their members and society?**

##### **4.1 The positive role families play**

We have already indicated to the need to carefully consider the meaning of "wealth". The true contribution of families to the well being of society and their own members can only be fully appreciated when we consider that the family is a significant locus of most of the forms of "genuine wealth" outlined above. It is not merely a place which provides for material needs.

At its best, the family is where a very wide range of activities occurs. At its best, it is where children learn to speak, to listen, to question. It is where they learn basic values. It is where they discover their self-identity. It is where they first try out their creativity. It is where they find emotional support throughout life. It is where they first make decisions. Many of these activities are not dependent on families having a particular format - they can occur wherever adults allow younger generations to grow and develop.

However, this question needs to be answered not in terms of ideals, but in terms of realities.

#### **5.6 The limits and burdens of self-reliant families**

In public debate in Australia it is often argued that families should be expected to make better provision for their own needs. One problem with this is that it fails to understand how hard many families struggle to meet their needs, even with help from income support and community services. That is, many families simply are not able to meet their own needs without help. A second problem, that of families dependent on low paid jobs, has already been alluded to in this submission. Low income families should not be expected to subsidise business, and that is what occurs when families receive wages too low to live on. At the very least, acceptance of a deregulated labour market and the lower wages which this would create implies an ethical responsibility on the Australian nation to supplement those wages with an adequate family allowance supplement. Families whose members participate in the work force should not be called "dependent" if they need such supplements - they have made their contribution to society, and society has a mutual responsibility towards them.

A further problem is that research has clearly shown that when policies emphasise family based welfare, they really mean that women are expected to sacrifice their own needs in favour of the caring role. For example, it is primarily women who care for elderly parents, or for disabled family members. This is highly stressful work, for which they receive little, if any, emotional or financial support from the community. Attention is particularly drawn to *Women in the Middle: care givers with a double burden of care*, a report of research by Elizabeth Watson and Jane Mears, at the School of Community and Welfare Studies, Macarthur Institute of Higher Education, PO Box 555 Campbelltown, NSW 2560. This study shows the unfair burden which rests on individual women when caring for family members who are elderly or disabled is left to "the family".

#### **5.7 Public provision - interdependent families**

We suggest that there needs to be a balance in public policy between valuing independence, and recognising people's inter-dependence. The public sector is an important mechanism by which Australians make communal provision for their needs. We reject the view that such provision encourages dependency. Rather it is a recognition that we have a responsibility for one another, and that many services involve great complexity and are best provided by joint provision through the

financially. This is not in the interests of families. Families need an adequate income, and they need those fulfilling the parental role to have adequate time, energy and emotional resources left over from paid employment so that they can fulfil the parenting role effectively.

Public policy should therefore take careful account of the effects on family life where the labour market is being deregulated, wages for already low paid workers are falling, a class of "working poor" develops, and those workers feel they have to work longer hours to supply the basic material needs of their families. Children do not only need food, shelter, clothing and so on - they need parents who will assist them in the psycho-social developmental tasks of their progress from infancy to adulthood. What happens to society as a whole, when families have to sacrifice time which should be spent on those tasks to extra time in paid employment to meet basic material needs?

### **5.5 Employment and families**

There are other ways in which the economy can better meet the needs of families. There is an urgent need for businesses to consult with their employees as to what their needs are and how the workplace might better take account of these needs. For example, businesses could greatly reduce the stress on families if they allowed the principal carer to take sick leave not only for personal sickness, but to care for a sick child. However, this needs to be available on the basis of an employee's responsibility for the child - it should not be restricted to mothers, or to people who are married. While employers sometimes argue that such schemes have costs, there is the counter argument that employees who are distracted by concern for a sick child are less productive, more accident prone, and so on. That is, it may well be more sensible, in the long term, to have a clear, budgeted cost rather than to have the now hidden costs. Further, employers who make deliberate provision for the family responsibilities of their employees are likely to gain in terms of employee goodwill. In other words, provision for family responsibilities can be part of Total Quality Management, if implemented in an appropriate way.

It is important that employers do not restrict more flexible arrangements to their executive staff. Workers at all levels have families. Indeed, low paid employees might well face greater health problems in their families, and be more dependent on what they can provide for themselves as carers, than much higher paid executive staff whose families may be in better health and who may be able to afford to pay for carers when children are sick.

### **4.2 Negative roles families sometimes play**

At their worst, families can destroy these forms of wealth. They can discourage people from speaking, listening and questioning. They can leave children without socialisation, and without any sense of responsibility to those beyond the family. In some cases, they leave children without any sense of responsibility even to other family members. They can be a place where children are traumatised, and from which they have to escape at an early age because of physical, sexual, emotional or other forms of violence. Some families operate in ways which actively discourage children from learning how to make decisions, destroy their creativity, leave them without a self-concept. This can occur in "the very best of families"; ie it can occur in families which fit the form sometimes considered "ideal" or even "Christian", of married parents looking after their own children. Often the violence is hidden from outsiders.

### **4.3 Implications of these roles**

Most families, whatever their form, are neither ideal nor worst cases. Most families do some things well, and other things less well. Adults in many families can benefit from services which offer help and support for family responsibilities. Families would do their task better, if their members were provided with the training and support which they need. We can no longer, as a society, assume that people have the skills they need for family life, or that family breakdown is primarily a moral failure. Public policy must take account of family needs in terms of the wide range of activities which are important to family life and which at their best contribute to the various forms of "genuine wealth" of society.

However, public policy must also take account of the human realities whereby some "families" are incapable of meeting their responsibilities and instead destroy genuine wealth, in particular, destroying the lives of their members. When public policy does not adequately respond to such realities, it condones destructive family life, and contributes to social disorder.

The 1991 meeting of the NSW Synod, for example, called upon the Government to invest substantial resources in positive policies to enhance family life and prevent family breakdown. The wider implications are taken up in answer to the other terms of reference. If families are to function well, then they need public policy which recognises their needs and a society which cooperates with families

rather than seeing families as something to be left to the women to see to (an attitude which is still common), or as an obstruction to efficient production.

## 5. How can the economic system be changed to help families in their task of nurturing and developing their children?

### 5.1 The economy should serve people and their families

The heading for Section 5 was one of the terms of reference of the Lyons Forum. We have retained it in this submission because it enables us to take up further the point made at the end of the preceding section. The economic system should take more account of realities of family life and the needs of dependents, whether children, disabled persons or the elderly. This is both a moral responsibility, and a matter of long term common sense for the material as well as emotional and spiritual well-being of society.

The economic system should function not in favour of a particular family type (two parents, officially married, and their children), but in ways which ensure that the families with least resources and most stress are nevertheless able to fulfil their responsibilities. That is, public policy should encourage an economic system which responds to the needs of families, rather than to particular forms of family life.

### 5.2 Unemployment as a major family issue

One of the most obvious needs is that many families have no person in paid employment. There is urgent need to adopt and pursue a policy aimed at full employment. However, the NSW Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia does not support the idea of jobs at any cost, since we believe that usually the cost of such a policy is borne by the already disadvantaged, and by the environment. **Rather we would advocate a policy of full employment for all who want it, at adequate wages, in an ecologically sustainable economy.** Families need sufficient income on which to live. If wages are reduced below the level on which families can meet their basic human needs, then there needs to be income support to raise their income level to that at which they can meet those needs.

We attach material which takes up the unemployment issue in more detail.

### 5.3 Families and economic productivity

Family life and the contribution of families to the well-being of society is being eroded by the increasing emphasis on productivity and GDP. This trend seems to underlie much of the Government's policy: social policy is subordinated to economic policy. These trends are also strong in the thinking of the Federal Opposition. One of the concerns which Uniting Church staff expressed about the *Fightback* proposals in 1992 was that *Fightback* seemed to equate the well being of the family with increased income. They questioned the claims of *Fightback* which suggested that if tax rates were lowered, and government spending cut, families would be better off because their members would have the incentive to work harder in the paid workforce, to bring home bigger incomes. It would seem more consistent with so called "family values" to argue the opposite, justifying the policy on the grounds that because people retained more of their income, they could work less hours and have more time with their families.

However, to argue either direction is inadequate. Many families do not need more money in order to function better, nor do they merely need more parental time. They need an adequate range of services provided through a coherent public sector, and not merely a market for everything. This argument is taken up again below in general terms. In addition, as UNIFAM has often argued, an important part of what families need are better services to help them function - services which help them develop skills of relating and parenting, and services which help them when things go wrong : ie effective family and community services to deal with dysfunctional families, violence, sexual abuse of children and so on. These need to be provided through the public sector, since people most in need of such services often have least skills to function in "the market" and least awareness of what help they need.

### 5.4 Wage levels and family well-being

While there are many reasons why families have two adults working, some families feel they have no choice about this because both are on low wages and both working is the only way to survive financially. The Uniting Church views with concern the movement towards a deregulated labour market , since the evidence is that this is tending to lower the wages of already low paid workers, making it necessary that even longer hours are invested in paid employment if the family is to survive