THE RESPONSE OF THE CHURCH TO CHANGING FAMILY STRUCTURES AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF THE 'NEW' CHILDREN'S ACT NO 38 0F 2005

I will begin by looking at the aims and objects of the Children's Act, Act 38 of 2005, and at some provisions of other Acts that have direct bearing on the well-being of children. Next, I will discuss the growing incidence of "child-headed households" as well as displaced, and sometimes unaccompanied, children because these children grow up in circumstances that are less than ideal in terms of the nurturing associated with the family. I will also give special attention to disabled children, many of whom spend their early formative years in institutional care separated from their families and the community. These groups of children are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Then I will turn my attention to those provisions of the Children's Act that those engaged in children and youth work in the church context need to become familiar with since the Act holds them accountable for safeguarding the well-being of the children they deal with.

I will also discuss the role of the family in terms of the nurturing and socialization of children, looking at both traditional and non-traditional family structures. While traditional structures still predominate, new patterns that may require a redefinition of what we regard as family are emerging. I will also consider the consequences of failing to adequately nurture children who are born into atypical, dysfunctional and/or marginalized families. Lastly, I will address the need for the church to rediscover its social relevance through outreach and by partnering with secular agencies that share its concern for promoting and protecting the values that undergird the family as a social institution.

The chief object of Act 38 of 2005 is to promote the preservation and strengthening of families, thus giving effect to the constitutional rights of children to family or parental care or to appropriate alternate care that as closely as possible resembles a caring family environment when this is not possible, always safeguarding the physical, psychological, intellectual, emotional and social development of children. It seeks to strengthen and develop community structures that promote and protect these rights, thus seeking to protect children from discrimination, exploitation, maltreatment, abuse, neglect and physical, emotional or moral harm, always including recognition of the special needs that children with disabilities may have. The terms of the Children's Act cover both matters that fall under the purview of the national government and those that the provinces are responsible for.

It is compulsory for anyone who comes into contact with a child who appears to be maltreated, abused, neglected, degraded, discriminated against, exploited, or exposed to physical, emotional or moral harm or hazard to report this fact to the relevant authorities, including private welfare organizations such as Child Welfare or Christelik-Maatskaplike Raad (dealing with children up to the age of 12), as well as the Department of Social

Development (dealing with children over the age of 12), and the Child Protection Unit of the S.A. Police Force: failure to do so is a criminal offence. It is thus important for all

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citizens, particularly those who work with children, in the church context including ministers, pastors, Deacons, Evangelists, Bible Women, lay counselors, and those who work in Children's Churches, pre-schools, schools, after-care and homework centres, etcetera, to be informed of their obligations, and the available agents of intervention, in this regard. As you may be aware, it will shortly become compulsory for all persons who have access to children, whether volunteers or employees, to be screened for suitability in order to safeguard children from any and all forms of neglect or abuse.

The Act has taken into account the fact that the H.I.V./AIDS pandemic, together with large-scale urban migration, have resulted in considerable numbers of children not being cared for by their parents. With this in mind, it provides more flexibility for the recognition of alternate care arrangements. It promotes and protects the rights of children to participate in decisions affecting them from the age of 12, including decisions about medical and/or surgical procedures, provided that the child concerned has the maturity and mental capacity to understand the benefits, risks, and social implications of such medical and/or surgical intervention. Even in situations where parental consent is required, children have a right to be involved in decisions affecting them. With regard to decisions affecting their health, children have the right to have access to information regarding prevention, treatment and prognosis, and they have the right to confidentiality unless maintaining confidentiality is not in their best interests. Vulnerable children who are chronically ill or disabled must be treated with dignity, and their right to participate in decisions affecting them must be respected. Children over 12 years of age who have the maturity to understand the risks may refuse medical treatment. In the interests of the well-being of children, even where parental consent is required, medical treatment may not be withheld on purely religious or cultural grounds unless there is a medically acceptable alternate choice to the treatment or operation concerned. Likewise, whatever their religious or cultural background, children may not be given out in marriage or engagement below the minimum age set by law for a valid marriage or without their consent above that minimum age. Genital mutilation or the circumcision of female children is prohibited, and virginity testing is permissible only on children older than 16 and only with their consent. Circumcision of male children under 16 may only be performed for medical reasons or for religious purposes in the prescribed manner, and male children over 16 have the right to refuse circumcision. These clauses are aimed at enabling children to protect themselves from the consequences of parental and/or cultural coercion if and when necessary. The age of majority has been reduced to 18, at which age young people may make legally binding decisions.

Early engagement in sexual activity has resulted in the lowering of the age for accessing reproductive health care to 12 years. The Children's Act thus appears to support the terms of the Choice of Termination of Pregnancy Act, Act 92 of 1996 which states that, although minors must be advised to seek the advice of their parents or guardian, they do not need their permission to request termination of pregnancy. Read together with Act 92

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of 1996 and the Children's Act, Act 38 of 2005, Sections 15 and 16 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, Act 32 of 2007 have caused great controversy. Since the church engages with children and their families in a wide variety of interactions it is important that we have a clear understanding of exactly what Sections 15 and 16 do or do not say.

Quoting directly from Act 32 of 2007, Section 15 reads as follows:-
Acts of consensual sexual penetration with certain children (statutory rape)
15(1) A person ("A") who commits an act of sexual penetration with a child ("B") is, despite the consent of B to the commission of such an act, guilty of the offense of having committed an act of consensual sexual penetration with a child.
   (2) a) The institution of a prosecution for an offense referred to in subsection (1) must be authorized by the National Director of Public Prosecutions if both A and B were children at the time of the alleged commission of the offence, provided that, in the event that the National Director of Public Prosecutions authorizes the institution of a prosecution, both A and B must be charged with contravening subsection (1).
      b) The National Director of Public Prosecutions may not delegate his or her power to decide whether a prosecution in terms of this section should be instituted or not.

Section 16 reads exactly the same but under the heading:-
Acts of consensual sexual violation with certain children (statutory sexual assault),
describing violation as any act of direct or indirect contact between the sexual organs, anus, or mouth of one person or, in the case of a female, her breasts, and any part of the body of another person or animal or any object that could be used for penetration, arousal or stimulation, including masturbation or insertion, but without sexual penetration.

Comment on the government website by the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development claims that Sections 15 and 16 of Act 32 of 2007, when read together with Sections 56(2)(b) and 66(2)(a)(vi), intend to avoid a situation in which consensual teenage sexual experimentation of a non-penetrative nature between the ages of 12 and 16 leads to criminal prosecution. But when one actually reads Section 56(2)(b) this is less clear because it states "it is a valid defense to contend that both accused persons were children and that **the age difference was not more than two years",** unless they are related to each other within the prohibited incest degrees of blood affinity or adoptive

relationship. It is reassuring that prosecutors will make decisions on a case by case basis and that they will have the discretion to prosecute or not on the merits of each case. The question is whether there should be even the possibility that consensual teenage sexual experimentation, particularly of a non-penetrative nature, could lead to prosecution since investigating the possibility of laying charges could be traumatic and/or damaging to the children concerned, with long-term consequences. It also seems inconsistent with the fact that children of 12 have access to reproductive health care, including access not only to contraception but also to abortion with or without parental approval, which seems to imply that their engagement in penetrative sexual activities within certain age parameters

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is legally sanctioned. It needs to be asked whether the legislation referred to sufficiently respects and protects the integrity and the authority of the family as a social institution? In the face of the possibly damaging impact of such legislation on the family as the basic custodian of traditional values, how could we as the church engage with children and their families in ways that uphold those cohesive family values while at the same time responding to changing social norms in ways that allow children to exercise their right to making or participating in decisions that affect them?

With regard to child-headed households, siblings in such households should as far as reasonably possible and practicable remain together in the interests of maintaining and benefitting from the emotional support provided by their family ties. It is a sad fact that some of these orphaned children do have close relatives, sometimes living in close proximity to them, but the stigma attached to H.I.V./AIDS leads relatives to ignore the plight of these children. One of the primary functions of the family as a social institution is to provide adequate nurturing and socialization, thus enabling children to become independent, self-supporting adults: so, the independent functioning of such households must be promoted, and supportive services must aim to enhance their functioning as a family, giving particular attention to providing appropriate surrogate parental role models and to managing and/or alleviating the age inappropriate but inevitable stress placed on the head of the household. This means meeting their basic material needs for food, clothing, schooling, transport, health care and shelter, as well as providing them with access to necessary psychosocial support. Members of such households are entitled to benefit from social assistance in terms of the Social Assistance Act, Act 13 of 2004, but this is not always easy to access when they do not have the necessary documentation such as birth certificates. They must attend school regularly and are entitled to state subsidization of their school fees; they must also be offered opportunities to obtain employment skills. Disabled or chronically ill members of such households must be assisted to obtain special grants, proper care, and access to specialized educational and vocational facilities. These households must be visited regularly (at least every two weeks) by a supervising adult, and surrogate parenting by volunteers willing to build long-term relationships with them is to be encouraged, particularly where the head of the

household is very young, because, without such care and supervision, members of child-headed households are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

When I speak of "displaced children", I am referring to neglected, abandoned or runaway street-children (some of whom because of inadequate care beg or work on the streets but return home at night) as well as refugee children who are, particularly when unaccompanied by siblings or parents, as much at risk of abuse, discrimination and exploitation. For all these children, adapting to life on the streets or in strange surroundings following the trauma resulting from neglect, abuse, abandonment or losing their parents and/or siblings, as well as loss of the security of living in a family unit, is a bewildering and frightening experience, particularly when – as often happens – they are unwelcome and treated with careless disdain by the members of the communities they

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find themselves in. Street children are often reduced to living by their wits; they consequently attend school irregularly, if at all, and easily get drawn into criminal activities because they have little or no education and few employment skills. Refugee children, even those who are accompanied by parents or siblings, find that their refugee status creates great disruption in their lives. In South Africa, they have to contend with xenophobia and with officials who operate according to government policies that are in many ways hostile to refugees. As a result, few community resources cater for their needs. When they are unaccompanied, they too often find themselves living on the streets or in hostels together with other children in a similar predicament. If we believe that each generation collectively parents the next generation regardless of kinship, and that children are best nurtured and socialized in the family, we need to strive to create care facilities that as far as possible resemble family life, as the spirit of the Children's Act encourages. But providing care in "constituted" family units headed by house-parents, or offering to foster or adopt such children, will challenge us to leave our comfort zone because it will call for direct engagement with these displaced children rather than allowing us to support care initiatives at an impersonal distance; it will also require us to raise our voices on behalf of these vulnerable children whom the world so often disregards. If we wish to safeguard the family as a social institution, we must seek, if at all possible, to restore runaway street-children to their families; if that is not possible, we must strive to care for both them and unaccompanied refugee children in circumstances that as closely as possible resemble a caring family environment. It is sobering to realize that there are millions of such vulnerable, displaced children around the world, many of whom are abused and exploited. They often fall through the cracks of children's rights charters and legislation is ineffective in meeting their need for love and care unless people like us seek them out in ways that provide nurture, socialization and a sense of belonging. Failure to do so has serious consequences in terms of contributing to crime and perpetuating poverty, as well as prejudicing their ability to develop meaningful relationships and adequately support families of their own in adulthood.

Disabled children, too, fall into the category of being "special children", but it is a sad fact that such children are more at risk of abuse than other children. The presence of a disabled child can disturb the functioning of a family because meeting that child's special needs is often financially, emotionally and psychologically draining on all members of the family. In the case of a genetic disability that is inherited from one of the parents, that parent may be blamed, or even abandoned, by the other parent. An inappropriate sense of guilt may lead parents to assume an attitude of compensatory indulgence towards the disabled child, leading other children in the family to feel neglected and/or resentful; in this situation, the disabled child may become what psychologists describe as "omnipotent", creating dysfunction by manipulating the entire family according to their whims. In developed countries, disabled children usually have access to educational facilities that allow them to remain with and enjoy the support of their families. But in countries like South Africa, vast distances and thinly scattered populations in rural areas mean that the majority of disabled children receive their care and education in residential institutions, sometimes far from home; they consequently spend little time with their

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families. This is not ideal since it often leads to inadequate socialization, unrealistic expectations, and estrangement from both family and community, all of which complicate integration into society when they leave school. Working towards as far as possible providing for their educational needs in regular schools alongside their able-bodied peers would go a long way towards making it possible for disabled children to remain at home and enjoy family life. It would, however, require overcoming our biases towards the disabled, thus offering emotional and spiritual support and acceptance to the disabled and their families, and working to change societal attitudes too. It also means reaching out to build bridges between the able-bodied community and those disabled children who must through no fault of their own grow up and be educated in institutional facilities. This can be done by means of visits, offering hospitality over weekends, arranging recreational activities or outings and/or opportunities for interaction with able-bodied children, thus integrating them into the community throughout their formative years. As church, we should set an example by examining and, if necessary, changing our attitudes, recognizing that, while the disabled can make significant contributions to society, their limitations are real. Calling them "differently-abled" may make us feel more comfortable and accepting, but it is a denial of their limitations that sometimes forces unrealistic expectations on them and thus does not respect or acknowledge the extraordinary effort they must make to overcome those limitations. They themselves prefer to be referred to as disabled, and we should respect that.

I have spent some time talking about orphaned, displaced and disabled children because the church is often ill-informed about their special needs and largely ignorant, and sometimes unwilling, to make a difference by embracing them with Christ's love and compassion. We talk of the church as a family, and indeed it **is** the family of God. But it

is a family like no other, bound together in all its diversity by God's all-embracing love – a love so vast and radically inclusive that it must make room for the orphaned and widowed, as well as the stranger, the lost, the disabled, the lonely and abandoned, and even those whose lacks have made them bitter, anti-social or unlovable. I will return to this theme again.

In moving on to consider some of the key definitions and provisions of the Children's Act in relation to the responsibilities of those who work with children and families in the church context, I want to point out that child abuse happens across the social and economic spectrum, also including the churchgoing community. Group-thinking, and the protectiveness that goes with it, often inclines group members toward ignoring or even hiding problems that may have painful or embarrassing consequences for members of their particular group, or which might damage the group's public image, but it is a criminal offense to fail to report instances of child abuse, or even the suspicion of it. The Children's Act places the well-being of children, and protection of their constitutional rights, before all other considerations.

Child refers to any person under the age of 18 years. **Abandoned** means a child who has obviously been deserted by the parent, guardian or care-giver, or a child who has, for no

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apparent reason, had no contact with the parent, guardian or care-giver for a period of at least three months. **Abuse** means any form of harm or ill-treatment deliberately inflicted on a child, including assault or injury, sexual abuse, bullying by another child, exploitative labour practices, or behavior that may be psychologically or emotionally harmful. **Neglect** means failure of a parent, guardian or care-giver to provide for the child's basic physical, intellectual, emotional or social needs. In terms of the **parental responsibilities and rights of mothers,** the biological mother of a child, whether married or unmarried, has full parental responsibilities and rights in respect of the child; but, if the biological mother is an unmarried child, and neither she nor the biological father have guardianship of the child, the guardian of the child's biological mother is also the guardian of the child. It is also important to understand the **parental responsibilities and rights of fathers,** whether married or unmarried. The biological father of a child has full parental responsibilities and rights in respect of the child if he is married to the child's mother or if he was married to the child's mother at the time of the child's conception, at the time of the child's birth, or at any time between the child's conception and birth. The unmarried biological father of a child acquires full parental responsibilities and rights in respect of the child if, at the time of the child's birth, he is living with the mother in a permanent life-partnership, or if, regardless of whether he has lived or is living with the mother, he successfully applies in terms of Section 26 to be identified as the child's father or pays damages in terms of customary law; contributes or has attempted in good faith to contribute towards the child's upbringing for a reasonable period; and contributes or has attempted in good faith to contribute towards expenses in connection with the

maintenance of the child for a reasonable period. This does not, however, affect the duty of a father to contribute towards the maintenance of the child. It is clear from the foregoing that the intention of the Children's Act is to raise children born to biological mothers who are themselves children in a family structure. Its attitude to biological fathers, married or unmarried, is, as far is possible, to promote the creation and maintenance of family units and/or kinship ties that provide children with a mother and a father, and to ensure that they are adequately provided for even when this is not possible.

For the purposes of the Children's Act, every magistrate's court shall be a children's court and shall have jurisdiction on any matter arising from the application of this Act for the area of its jurisdiction.

In terms of the Children's Act, children are further protected by the establishment of a **Child Protection Register** which is lodged with the Director-General**: Part A** of this register records all reports of abuse or deliberate neglect, all findings that a child is in need of care and protection as a result of such abuse or deliberate neglect, as well as all convictions of all persons on charges of abuse or deliberate neglect of a child. **Part B** of this register records the names of persons deemed to be unsuitable to work with children in order to protect children against abuse from these people: such a finding may be made by a children's court or by any other court, but may also be made by any forum established or recognized by law in any disciplinary proceedings concerning the conduct of that person relating to a child, or may be requested by an appropriate organ of state, a

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prosecutor involved with a criminal proceeding, or anyone who has a sufficient interest in the protection of children. Anyone in employment or seeking employment that entails direct contact with children but who fails to disclose that their name appears in Part B of the register is guilty of misconduct and may be summarily dismissed. Inquiries made by agencies that work with children must be directed to the Director-General on a confidential basis; a person whose name appears in Part B of the register may apply to any court to have their name removed on the ground that they have been rehabilitated but only after at least five years have elapsed since the entry was made, and subject to prescribed criteria. Applications to have an erroneous entry expunged must be directed to the Director-General.

For obvious reasons, this is a very brief and limited look at the Children's Act that merely highlights its intended impact on children and on family life. If you find yourself in a situation in which you need to act in terms of the Children's Act, it is available on the government website at www.info.gov.org.

Now I move on to a consideration of the family as a social institution. Let me begin with a broad definition of "family" to guide the discussion. Basically, a family is a social unit

of varying size that adheres to certain values and "family rules" typical of that particular family. The following are characteristics of family groups:-

family members share an intimate, interdependent emotional attachment that remains stable over time since the family is the main source of social and emotional support throughout life;

while a family has a unique identity that is distinct from other families or social groupings, its structure and identity may change over time;

family members share in material, social and emotional functions to do with acquisition and use of financial resources in ways that benefit all members;

the family is the primary agent in the socialization of children, forming and controlling social and sexual behavior according to cultural norms in order to ensure performance of pro-social roles within and outside the family;

family size may fluctuate as it loses members through separation, divorce or death, or gains members through birth, adoption or formation of new partnerships with other families or individuals;

the family provides care to dependent and sick and/or incapacitated members, although the extent of such care may vary;

the family could also be defined according to the life cycle, for example, newly established, childless, child-rearing, empty nest, retired, aged, remembering that needs and resources vary according to the stage of the life cycle the family finds itself in.

Some sociologists see the family as a declining social institution while others see changes and the emergence of different family configurations as dynamic adaptations to changing social and economic conditions. While the majority of children still grow up in nuclear families, comprising of mother, father and their biological or adopted children, or in extended families, comprising of multi-generational kinship groups of varying size,

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family structures have become less stable. In addition to lower birth rates which shrink extended family ties because people have fewer relatives, migration, urbanization and globalization have caused people to move away from their families of origin. This trend, together with changing values, coinciding with the emergence of individualism and the personality ethic, has led to the formation of non-traditional families and non-family households, affecting partnerships, household formation, family patterns and rules, and kin networking, and presenting many challenges in terms of providing children with the stability and nurturing without which they cannot develop to their fullest potential as productive, gainfully employed members of society. And, in South Africa, the prevalence of migrant labour has had, and continues to have, a profound influence on family life in Black communities. The separation of livelihood activities from the household, and the long distances of these from one another, have loosened family ties and increased individuality, often leading to infidelity and estrangement (regardless of whether the union was entered into legally or according to traditional rites), or even fracturing families, because of the long separations inherent in the system.

Now let us consider various non-traditional family configurations and non-family households. Today, we see many more childless couples than in the past, either heterosexual or, increasingly, homosexual or lesbian. With advancing age, which often brings economic and/or physical decline, couples like these may not have an adequate kinship support system. The high incidence of divorce and remarriage that has followed in the wake of the greater social and economic independence of women and the emergence of more permissive sexual values which have altered behavior, has resulted in an increased incidence of merged families, often accompanied by a concomitant increase in estrangement between non-custodial parents and their children. Following a divorce, some parents, particularly mothers, remain single either by choice or circumstance, thus forming single-parent families. The social changes mentioned above have also resulted in a trend towards the deliberate establishment of mother-headed families in which fathers are involved to various degrees, or not at all. Research has shown that single-parent families headed by mothers often suffer economic hardship which may significantly impact on the children in these families by curtailing their educational opportunities; they also frequently lack adequate supervision and the influence of appropriate male role models. Fearing the high financial and emotional costs of marital commitment and/or subsequent divorce, some couples opt for long-term partnerships, whether contractual or not, rather than marriage. The children of such partnerships may experience some alienation from those of their peers whose parents are married. Although there have always been polygamous households in South Africa, particularly in rural communities, they have recently gained greater social prominence. As a result of greater social acceptability of homosexual partnerships/marriages we see more homosexual and lesbian partnerships/marriages, and the presence of biological and/or adopted children in such households is becoming more common; they may, however, sometimes be hurt by homophobic attitudes. Migrant labour, which continues to be common in South Africa, created a situation in which children are raised by their grandparents, particularly their grandmothers, sometimes far away from their parents. The high mortality rate among

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adults of child-bearing age resulting from H.I.V./AIDS has necessitated that more and more grandparents raise their grandchildren. When grandparents are left to raise their orphaned grandchildren, families often experience financial hardship; a recent court ruling has placed a moratorium on payment of child-care grants to grandparents, thus their only source of income may be an Old Age Pension which is inadequate to meet their needs.

Today, the family, particularly in its non-traditional manifestations, faces many challenges that threaten its stability: the increased pace of life and greater economic and social stresses caused by high levels of unemployment, poverty and crime, have impacted on the family, creating a situation in which the home is not always a secure, safe or nurturing environment for children.

Today, we also need to consider the increasing prevalence of lifelong singleness, whether by choice or circumstance. In some instances women remain single because they often outnumber men, but they also sometimes choose to remain single because they are far better able to support themselves than was previously the case. Some single adults of either sex continue to reside with their parents, some becoming companions and/or carers to them as they advance in age, while others, particularly those who are unemployed, become economically dependent on, or even burdensome to, their parents. Others choose to live alone or to share accommodation with other unrelated adults to create non-family households. Institutional care of whatever kind creates non-family households that may vary greatly in size. Where such households are relatively small, configured as a collection of units each resembling a nuclear family structure, and reasonably stable over time, it is possible to achieve a sufficiently nurturing environment, but they nevertheless remain separated from the community in many ways. Where such households comprise large numbers of unrelated people, whether children or adults, there tends to be an absence of intimacy and nurturing, which is particularly damaging should their members be children in their formative years; the fact that there is a coming and going of the residents of such households also increases their vulnerability to various manifestations of dysfunction and/or abuse. The Children's Act seeks to regulate institutional care of children in ways that prevent abuse and promote their well-being, also encouraging family reconstruction whenever possible.

Now I turn to a consideration of how the complexities of life in the technological age, with its emphasis on individualism, materialism and instant gratification, impacts on the family and its effective functioning. After the World Wars, there was a shift from the character ethic that measured morality and success by qualities like integrity, humility, temperance, courage, justice, patience, diligence and simplicity which had for so long shaped family and societal values. The character ethic was to a large extent replaced by the personality ethic with its emphasis on the power of positive thinking, which promoted

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individualism and the worldly pursuit of happiness and instant gratification. Individualism encouraged feel-good permissiveness which eroded traditional values and made people less willing to make the effort and sacrifice required to put family commitments and social obligations before their individual rights and desires. This has led to a situation in which a third of all marriages in South Africa end in divorce. Divorce sometimes offers the only hope of ending an abusive marriage, but, even then, it brings many new problems in its wake. Apart from the economic hardship that often follows a divorce, and the emotional and social disruption to all the family members, divorce often contributes to teaching children to seek instant gratification rather than morality and

perseverance and making them subject to the uncertainties of their own or others' whims. Adults who complain about the attitudes displayed by young people are often oblivious to the influence their own values and lack of self-discipline have on their children; children do not simply do what they are told, but follow the example significant adults set.

The shift to the personality ethic has resulted in a gradual erosion of traditional values and morality, coinciding with a weakening of the church's position as the moral compass of society, and the ascendance of esoteric new age philosophies that emphasize human achievement and place rights before obligations. Materialism and the pursuit of wealth have not only created great disparities and resentments between the haves and the have-nots but have also had an impact on our values, leading to a situation in which money is not seen as a resource to benefit all but is selfishly amassed for personal aggrandizement by those with greater access to resources to the detriment of others and society as a whole. Consequently, personal advancement rather than loyalty is often the guiding principle in the workplace. Some employers erode loyalty and motivation by overworking and/or underpaying fewer employees for greater profit; they are careless of their employees and insensitive to the plight of the unemployed. Thus many people have little respect for the property and person of others, leading to both petty crime and embezzlement in the workplace. Since employers, employees and the unemployed all belong to families, these manifestations of materialism have a huge impact on morality and family life.

Technological advances have had a huge impact on daily life with the arrival of television and computers which speeded up communication and dissemination of information, but have, over time, changed the way in which people and, in particular, members of families interact with one another. The use of cell phones, the internet, facebook, chatrooms, mixit, etcetera, have resulted in profound changes in the ways in which people access information, and communicate and relate to one another, making communication more rapid but also increasingly impersonal and superficial. Effective nurturing and socialization require time, presence and meaningful personal interaction, but even in their homes family members with access to technology sometimes spend more time alone than interacting with each other. Advancing technology, coupled with materialism, has also created the illusion that mankind is the master of its own destiny and that God and the church are entirely irrelevant. The sometimes mindless escapism from uncomfortable realities offered by virtual reality does not proclaim enlightenment or freedom but the

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emptiness of meaningless living; it is not self-indulgence that brings freedom but the purposefulness of discipline and morality which parents should teach in the home. Such escapism is very evident, too, in the increased use of feel-good "recreational" drugs which initially seems to boost confidence and enhance social interaction but all too often results in addiction, particularly among children who lack self-esteem or adequate parental oversight. Overindulgence in drugs and/or alcohol by parents, which is quite

common in South Africa, can have devastating financial, social and emotional consequences for their families, particularly their dependent children.

Today, mothers as well as fathers are often employed outside the home, and, even when this is not the case, children commence their education at an early age, which means that they are strongly influenced, not only by their parents but also by their care-givers, teachers and peers. The extent to which children discuss their concerns with, and accept guidance from, their parents will depend on the extent to which their parents are nurturing and open to their questions and ideas. But, when parents are neglectful, absent, abusive or distracted by social and/or work pressures, children compensate for their resultantly low self-esteem by seeking approval and affirmation from their peers. Such children frequently have poor judgement and uncertain moral values which makes them vulnerable to negative influences because they cannot risk the disapproval of their peers by saying "no". It is unfortunate that there is a misperception that being a rebel or a "tough guy" is glamorous when in reality most rebels and bullies suffer from low self-esteem for which their bravado and risk-taking behavior is a cover. Such children may seek to satisfy their need for affirmation by joining gangs and indulging in anti-social and violent behavior, but the gang sub-culture of shared secrets and shame does not allow them to leave, nor do they usually have the strength of character to risk the consequences of attempting to leave. Gang members often become trapped in a life of crime, which has sometimes devastating consequences, not only for their own families but also for other families in their neighbourhoods.

The Children's Act provides for children who are neglected or abused to be removed from their parents, but it is a sad fact that both non-familial foster care and institutional care often subject them to further rejection and to separation and estrangement from their parents and siblings, and attempts at family reconstruction often remain unsuccessful. Inadequate welfare resources often mean that such children remain inadequately nurtured, and are poorly educated and poorly equipped for employment and independent adulthood. Unless members of the community, like us, involve themselves by seeking access to these children in order to build mentoring relationships with them, they often in adulthood lack self-esteem, and find themselves disadvantaged, isolated, stigmatized and rejected. Self-esteem is a prerequisite for treating others with respect, which in turn underlies healthy social and familial relating. Children need to be nurtured in a way that helps them to esteem themselves by creating opportunities for them to discover and develop their talents and potentialities so that they will as adults be equipped to live meaningful and productive lives; this is an educational and moral responsibility

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incumbent on child-care workers, teachers, parents and, indeed, all who value children as a gift to be cherished.

Many of the social ills that threaten the stability of family life in fact arise from family dysfunction, creating and perpetuating a vicious circle of child abuse in the form of neglect, lack of nurture and physical violence. Early intervention is needed because research shows that abused children frequently become abusive themselves, thus establishing a family pattern that is passed down from generation to generation. But children are also increasingly, on a worldwide scale, victims of abuse by care-givers, and by teachers and bullying peers in the school environment. Child abuse is both a symptom and a cause of fractured relationships which points to the erosion of morality and values in the family, thus contributing to the creation of a dysfunctional society in which people do not respect the person and property of others and resort to violence to solve their problems. In South Africa, the unhealed wounds of apartheid have left a legacy of angry people. Many remain imprisoned by past hurts and present injustices, doing more harm to their own spirits than to the targets of their hatreds, and, worst of all, raising their children in a toxic environment that teaches them to resort to violence rather than negotiation. The reactive anger that is so evident in our everyday environment is destructive, leading to violence and crime, which inevitably impact negatively on family life and society as a whole.

In sociological terms, crime may be defined as the deliberate violation of another person's rights or values, the deliberate violation or damage of another person's property and/or possessions, and/or the deliberate infliction of physical and/or psychological injury on another person. In biblical terms, crime originates, in the first instance, from the sin of disrespecting the rights, person, property, possessions or needs of another person, thus disobeying Jesus' commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself, and eroding the guiding value of mutual respect on which civil law and justice rest. It must be noted that people are often so aggrieved by crime that they fail to see that it begins with small things they may themselves be guilty of, like taking stationary home from the workplace, thus eroding the morality of their children by setting a poor example.

Crime manifests itself in many ways, all of which impact on the family by damaging and/or depriving its members in various ways. In South Africa, theft, fraud and corruption have become rife to the extent that it has become a way of life for some. Apart from the way in which these crimes rob employers and tax payers, they deprive the poor, including vast numbers of children, of resources that are necessary to their survival and well-being. The rapid and often unethical enrichment of the new elite has created a society in which many are corrupted by association, and in which corruption is in danger of becoming normative for the children who are surrounded by it. Corruption seems to have become a false religion that threatens to erode the social and moral fabric of South African society, greatly enriching a few immoral people while increasing unemployment and reducing growing numbers of people to lifelong poverty that works against protecting the family as a sustainable and economically viable unit.

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Violent crime manifests in various ways. Although murder is most often perpetrated by partners and family members, we are increasingly confronted by the brutality and senseless murder of defenseless men, women and children, often by thugs who invade their homes in order to rob and/or harm them. Such brutal acts speak of high levels of hatred, resentment, uncontrolled anger and hopelessness on the part of the perpetrators, which sparks equally great trauma, resentment and anger in victims and their families, whose lives may be devastated by such events.

 Rape (including sodomy) of women and children is rife in South Africa. Rape places selfish self-gratification above morality. It is always an act of extreme violence, and a total violation of the victim's dignity and human rights. It has nothing whatever to do with a woman's dress, behavior or location, nor is it sexually motivated. Violation of a woman's right to refuse sex, even by that woman's husband or partner, always constitutes rape. Rape of children, both by adults and by other children, is particularly violent and traumatic, often resulting in great and long-lasting physical as well as psychological damage to victims. In the South African context, rape brings with it not only stigmatization of victims but the real and frightening possibility of being infected with H.I.V. As a result of the low rate of convictions, very few rapes are reported, which leaves victims who have no access to counseling to struggle unaided with their outrage, humiliation, fear and sense of isolation and alienation, thus placing great strain on their marriages/partnerships and their families. Rape occurs across the social and economic spectrum. It reflects social attitudes towards women in a society that remains largely hierarchical and male dominated, and in which many men have an attitude of sexual entitlement, believing that they have a "right" to sex with women even without their consent. Such men, many of whom are fathers, are poor role models, exhibiting a distorted model of manhood that influences boys to be aggressive and domineering towards others, particularly their wives/partners, and encourages girls to accept male domination, and even abuse, as the norm.

Abuse, whether physical, emotional or sexual, frequently occurs within the family, representing dysfunctional family dynamics, providing children with poor role models and making the home a stressful and unsafe environment that cannot adequately nurture children. Economic necessity often forces women to stay in abusive relationships, leading them to protect their abusers out of fear and shame so that it becomes an under-reported "secret" crime, but protecting perpetrators from the consequences of their actions tends to lead to escalation into increasing violence and even murder. The situation is aggravated by lack of social support for single-parent women who refuse to enter into or remain in abusive relationships. At present, interventions to teach boys better attitudes towards women and to encourage girls to esteem themselves sufficiently to refuse to tolerate physical or emotional abuse are too sporadic to make a significant impact. These interventions ought to be incorporated into school curricula, but this does not seem to be a priority in a crumbling public school system.

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The **Child, Youth and Family Development Study** undertaken for the Department of Social Development by the Human Sciences Research Council in 2004 found that the main cause of family breakdown in poor communities in South Africa is lack of access to employment and social services that enable the maintenance of family life. As I have mentioned, the legislators who drafted the Children's Act, Act 38 of 2005, state that their aim is to protect the rights of children and to safeguard the family as a social institution, but it cannot achieve its goal in isolation from the social realities in South Africa. There is no doubt that the single greatest threat to family life is the hugely unequal distribution of resources and the misuse, maladministration and wastage of resources, both human and material, that leads to unemployment and perpetuates poverty. According to this study, poverty now affects at least 50% of children in South Africa, with dire consequences such as high infant mortality and malnutrition which stunts physical growth, makes such children vulnerable to infectious disease and disabling injury, and limits intellectual potential. The intellectually compromised who, in addition, lack adequate educational and material resources, remain unable to compete with their better resourced peers throughout their lives and are further hampered by their consequent lack of self-esteem. Poor communities are inevitably under-resourced, and inadequate access to health care and to child care facilities limits mothers' options for employment and alternate child care arrangements. School attendance is often erratic and 35% of the children in the poorest communities do not attend school at all. Rising life expectancy means that elderly family members dependent on an Old Age Pension, who have no savings and no access to medical aid, must often be cared for, thus placing an additional burden on poor families. Social problems such as crime, violence, substance abuse, child neglect and abuse of women and children are usually far more prevalent in poor communities, but family support as a preventive strategy is often inadequate or entirely absent. In many parts of the world, the poor live in make-shift structures in informal settlements that lack basic amenities such as clean water, electricity and proper sanitation. Living in such squalid conditions reduces the quality of life to a constant struggle for survival that is dreary and joyless. As already mentioned, the poor are also too often poorly educated and illiterate or semi-literate, which means that they are both unemployable and lacking in the entrepreneurial and job skills needed for self-employment. There is a clear link between poverty and crime because desperation may drive the poor to opportunistic theft, thus starting a downward spiral in which increasing desperation and growing boldness may eventually lead to violence. In addition, they are taken advantage of by career-criminals who entice them to carry out robberies and car hi-jackings in exchange for money.

The poor almost always live in overcrowded conditions in which there is a total lack of privacy. Research has shown that, in conditions devoid of stimulation and recreation, sex

becomes a common diversion. Children growing up in such conditions are exposed to overt sex from infancy. This tends to trivialize sex and leads to experimentation at an age when the sacredness and implications of sex are not understood: this has a lifelong impact

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on their values and the quality of their relationships. In these circumstances, children are inevitably exposed to sexual exploitation, and there is almost certainly a link between growing up in poverty, with all the concomitant deprivations it brings, and phenomena such as prostitution and young girls trading sex for the material rewards offered by older men. Grinding poverty robs people of hope, dignity and self-esteem. The relative spatial and social isolation of informal settlements makes the poor largely "invisible" to the more affluent, including political and civic leaders: the social injustice and material inequity that result from their indifference, and from unwise governance, give rise to great resentment, producing a sense of entitlement that does not respect the person and property of others. It is easy to see that this is a volatile situation that erodes social harmony, entrenches poverty and threatens the well-being of the family as a social institution. If we, as church, would make a difference, we must understand that it may require us to re-examine our sometimes middle-class attitudes and financial priorities lest they contribute to the perpetuation of poverty.

There is, of course, a huge overlap between poor education and unemployment, and between unemployment and poverty. Lowered educational standards resulting from inadequate training and dedication on the part of teachers, and implementation of inappropriate and administratively burdensome educational systems, has most heavily impacted on the poorest communities, trapping them in poverty. When parents do not or cannot bring their part to the educational partnership that should exist between parent and teacher, and/or leave the disciplining of their children to their teachers, children often lack discipline and motivation which is reflected in poor academic results, high rates of substance abuse and teenage pregnancies, and the high levels of violence and vandalism we see in some schools. Poverty brings added aggravations related to the high costs of transport, reluctance of some schools to process requests for subsidization of fees due to frequent non-payment or late payment, and lack of access to resources such as books and computers. None of these things tend to produce well-educated young people with the skills and motivation to become productive and responsible adults, which cannot but impact family life. In a society in which there are already high levels of unemployment, school leavers who are poorly educated and who lack self-discipline and motivation are at a great disadvantage.

Massive urbanization has resulted in depopulation and dwindling employment opportunities in rural towns and villages and the consequent oversupply of largely unskilled labour in urban areas. The 2011 Census has revealed the extent of this movement away from some provinces to Gauteng and the Western Cape, leading to a

situation in which social and financial resources in those provinces have become over-stretched and increasingly unable to cope. Unwise labour policies and practices that under-utilize available skills in favour of affirmative action lower productivity and lead to job losses, thus hampering redeployment, creation of employment opportunities and poverty alleviation strategies, all of which depend on economic prosperity. The greed that underlies huge pay packages for political, civic and business leaders must be addressed because it drains society of the resources needed to uplift the poor and create job

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opportunities. It is often overlooked that families, in particular poor families, are not entirely self-sufficient entities but depend on the political, economic and social environment to support them in their caring functions. Economic support in the form of grants should not be seen as a cost but as an investment in human capital that increases the social cohesion and health of the community, but such assistance becomes unsustainable when greed and corruption drain too much from the economy, with potentially devastating consequences for the families dependent on social grants.

It is clear from the foregoing that, seen as a social institution, the family is influenced by the social, economic and political circumstances in which it is located. The church is also, seen from a sociological perspective, a social institution that is influenced by the environment in which it is located. But, while that is undeniable, I believe that the church could regain the relevance and influence it once had as the moral compass of society if it focused its missional energy on families, and particularly on children from non-traditional families, non-family households, and from the poorest communities. I have several suggestions in this regard for you to consider.

Earlier, I referred to the radical inclusiveness the church, as the family of God, ought to exhibit. In elaborating on this theme, I want to begin by considering the fact that God ordained that we do not get to choose who the members of our families of origin are. In the same way, it is God, rather than our fellow believers, who chooses whom he will adopt into his family. But, using the divisive and as yet incomplete discussion of same-sex relationships as an example, we are clearly not sure that we believe this, and homosexual churchgoers, particularly those in marriages or partnerships, often seem to be merely tolerated, but never acknowledged or fully accepted as such. Turning now to a broader consideration of non-traditional families, do we avoid facing the reality that changes in the social and moral environment surrounding us may require us to change our attitudes? Do we have a clear idea of what we understand by 'family'? Do we define family according to its nurturing functions, or do we have a narrow understanding of it based on a norm that no longer altogether fits social reality? Throughout its history, the church has been inclined toward an "us and them" mentality, setting boundaries, placing people in categories, and sometimes judging them in order to preserve our identity. May I suggest that, as long as we avoid examining and if necessary changing our attitudes, we

lose, not only the gifts of diversity, but the opportunity to truly embrace members of non-traditional families and non-family households, particularly the children, none of whom had a say in the circumstances of their birth. While we have come to accept divorce, and the prevalence of blended families, we have difficulty in accepting single out-of-wedlock motherhood, same-sex and non-marital partnerships, and sometimes in baptizing children from such families. As a community of sinners rather than saints, do we have the right to distance ourselves from or condemn those who choose alternate lifestyles as more sinful than ourselves? Looking at Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan Woman, who certainly did not come from a traditional family background, he did not attempt to "fix" her, nor did he judge or condemn her; instead, he offered her the hope of living water that would

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enable her to move to a different place in the future. Is that not what he requires of us as we seek to reclaim our relevance as the moral compass of society?

Publications dealing with the 'emerging' church - or, perhaps, more accurately, the 'submerging' church - frequently point to two, to my mind, crucial issues. The first is the need to re-evangelize the church itself before we seek to influence and/or evangelize the world. The second is that, with the emergence of secular advisers and counselors, people no longer turn to pastors for assistance in dealing with their problems; this means that fewer people seek guidance from the church as they previously did, leading me to conclude that the church needs to go to the people it would serve.

Firstly, what does re-evangelization of the church mean? May I suggest that it points to a need for more intentional discipleship. In considering what discipleship means, I think we need to understand that disciples are not for the church; rather, the church is for discipleship, and disciples are for the world. Discipleship is not a religious phenomenon but refers to a way of life born of and leading to a thirst for deeper knowledge of God and God's ways. There is almost nothing of value in human life that does not require discipline of the kind that happens outside of the times when we are called on to perform some skilled and/or difficult activity; athletes, artists, and practitioners of various skills know the necessity of on-going training. This, of course, applies equally well to our spiritual lives and the on-going practice of the spiritual disciplines by means of which we are inwardly transformed, thereby achieving greater outward Christlikeness. The resultant shifts in our attitudes towards ourselves and our possessions could not but counter the middle-class materialism which has contributed to the widespread apathy about social issues in the church of today. I believe that a commitment to intentional discipleship will enable us to reclaim our social activism in ways that lead us to become the voice of the oppressed, often voiceless and poverty stricken millions, in the interests of protecting their families and the well-being and morality of the children raised within them, always remembering that we need to respect those we seek to serve sufficiently to engage with them lest we foist inappropriate perceptions and interventions on them.

Secondly, we need to heed the example of the early disciples and missionaries to "go out into all the world making disciples........." thus "making the world our parish" as Wesley enjoined us to do. Bearing in mind that most commitments to Christ occur before the age of fourteen, we need to become a safe and familiar but non-judgemental presence at locations children frequent such as clubs, internet cafes, and schools. Although religious studies of a specifically Christian nature are not part of school curricula in South Africa, we are permitted to contribute to life skills programmes, and even to participate in or lead school assemblies, provided that we have approval from the principals of the relevant schools. By providing encouragement and support to stressed teachers and school boards, we could improve their motivation and performance. Offering extra tuition or homework supervision to children from schools in the vicinity of our churches is another way in which we can engage with children in positive ways that offer opportunities to encounter Christian values. Involvement in sporting activities offers opportunities to provide

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appropriate role models, particularly among poor, fatherless and otherwise disadvantaged children. But we also need to consider ways in which to interface with and improve the lives of displaced, disabled, deviant, troubled and institutionalized children by coming alongside their families and care-givers, and joining hands with the secular agencies charged with their care in our communities. Conversations about such involvement abound, but we need to move from conversation to action. I believe that the re-evangelization of our congregations will lead those with the time and skills to answer God's call to this ministry of service to the children of South Africa as they more intentionally become Christ's instruments of transformation in the world. It will, however, call for dedication and commitment.

I believe that women, who greatly outnumber men in our congregations, have a pivotal role to play in shaping the attitudes of their children, and their children's friends. The theme in women's gatherings is often how to ensure that young men will cherish and treat their daughters with respect. With respect, they too often fail to recognize and use the influence they have in their homes and the community effectively. Even in traditionally patriarchal cultures, women have great influence in the matter of family decisions, particularly those concerning their children. The tendency of abused women to assume victimhood is not helpful because it further alienates the very men that most need to be part of the conversation. When they find the courage to respect themselves sufficiently to refuse to tolerate abuse from men, including their fathers, husbands, partners and relatives, mothers demonstrate to both their sons and their daughters that it is unacceptable either to inflict or tolerate abuse. Rape and abuse are not "women's issues" but community issues that concern and affect men, women and children and the families they belong to. Whether male or female, we are all part of the problem, and we must all become part of the solution to reduce these violent and degrading acts that harm or even destroy the families of both victims and perpetrators. Women who have suffered abuse

can find strength and healing by sharing their stories with one another and, in so doing, the soil of their brokenness can become the fertilizing humus of transformation instead of the embittering bondage of resignation and unforgiveness.

Women need to recognize and claim their enormous power to influence their children. Thus, mothers should introduce their daughters to brave, inspirational role models such as Albertina Sisulu whose faith and commitment to justice enabled her to face and overcome extreme persecution, in so doing demonstrating great dignity and earning respect such as that they would like men to show their daughters – even from her persecutors. If mothers encourage their daughters to recognize and develop their talents and skills, and talk to them about their values, fears, hopes and dreams, they will raise confident, courageous girls who will not demean themselves by tolerating abuse or using sex as a commodity but will demand respect from men because they know their true worth.

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It is also mothers who have the opportunity to teach their sons to be gentle and vulnerable enough to get in touch with their emotions and their need to nurture and be nurtured rather than always to control. It is, however, important to understand that we live in a world in which many factors dispose boys to feel fearful and emasculated, leading to loss of self-esteem – and it is boys and men who lack self-esteem who become bullies because they do not sufficiently respect themselves to treat others with respect. Boys, too, need to be encouraged to develop their potential, and it is critical that we engage with and hold government accountable for improving education and reducing unemployment, thus creating opportunities for boys to make a meaningful contribution to society, recognizing that gainful employment is a major contributor to developing self-esteem. In South Africa, we have for too long raised our boys to be aggressive, teaching them to win at all costs instead of teaching them that a win-win attitude is more important than winning. When we teach our sons to maintain a "stiff upper lip", we mislead them into thinking that strong men do not give in to their feelings by showing emotion. But Jesus, that perfect example of manhood, wept. Strength lies in vulnerability and the gentleness of empathy, not in unfeeling aggression.

In South Africa, the greatest threat to the well-being of the family, whether traditional or non-typical, is poverty, and the church needs to find more effective poverty alleviation strategies than the present largely sporadic and unsustainable initiatives it employs. It must also, however, be acknowledged that the biggest stumbling block to poverty eradication is the mindset that develops as a result of long-term economic and social deprivation. Because the hopelessness and apathy engendered by poverty seem to trap people, poverty alleviation is as much, if not more, to do with attitudinal changes as with providing material assistance. It is tempting to respond to this apathy by taking over and

doing things for people, but this is usually counter-productive because it shows them insufficient respect by implying that they are incapable of helping themselves. When we assume that we know what people need rather than asking them what they see as their needs, and fail to identify and mobilize their talents, abilities and available resources, they will resist our efforts at poverty alleviation because we give them no reason to risk giving up the security of a known way of life Both missiological and community organization praxis have shown that the most effective way to unlock local talent and potential is for those engaged in the work to identify with and merge into the chosen community. It can take years for an "outsider" to achieve this to a sufficient degree to win the trust of the community. Bible Women and Evangelists are, in my opinion, a vastly under utilized resource. Since they are already part of the communities they serve, they seem to me to be ideally placed to initiate community development projects, which would be sustainable because they come to be "owned" by the community. It is my considered opinion that they could make a huge difference to the quality of the daily lives of many more people if their training were appropriately shaped to give the Order a higher profile and a new sense of purpose. It seems to me that we do not always accord Bible Women the dignity they deserve, leaving them to their own devices as they go about often doing what no one else is inclined to do. And, in some instances, Evangelists intrude on Ministers, either because they are unsure of their role, or because they aspire

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to ministerial authority. A more missional, community development approach, together with a clearer job description, would overcome these difficulties, and, perhaps add to the effectiveness of their service and evangelism efforts by assisting their communities to move beyond a preoccupation with mere survival, thus giving them the dignity and self-esteem of empowerment without which they cannot aspire to the transcendence contained in the gospel good news. In addition, or perhaps alternately, we could achieve more focus and success by employing professional community developers or partnering with agencies that are already engaged in such work.

Lastly, I suggest that it would be most beneficial for the church to forge links with secular agencies that seek to safeguard the family. In this way we could support members of the "helping" professions, who are frequently so overloaded that they can barely cope, offering ourselves as volunteers and gaining valuable insights that will enable us to share Christ's love more effectively because we have a deeper understanding of the problems and needs of those we come into contact with. But our most significant contribution would be the Christian understanding that it is our attitudes rather than our circumstances that determine outcomes, thereby tempering the unrealistic humanistic tendency to apply techniques to "fix" people and situations. Needs always outstrip available resources, but the hope contained in the gospel good news is freely available to all, offering the possibility of changing lives by positively influencing attitudes as we journey with people regardless of their circumstances, particularly when professional services are unavailable.

I believe that the church could regain its moral relevance to society, and to the family as the most basic agent of nurturing and socialization, even in these times of rapid social change, provided that we do not try to preserve our identity in ways that make us more and more exclusive and out of touch with changing social realities and needs. We will not woo or win the world by self-satisfied moralizing but by demonstrating the radically all-embracing alternate lifestyle that proclaims the kingdom of God - despite all our flaws.

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