
G. Justice and Healing in Families



How do we minister to families when they become places of injustice and pain? How does our faith speak to changing realities of family, gender and sexuality? Given the significant cultural and generational differences in how we understand family life and sexuality, how can we talk about and learn to live with these differences as part of the one household of God?

Many kinds of families

Why should we as a communion of churches focus on families? Because it is in families that human beings are brought into the world, nurtured, supported emotionally and economically, and raised to participate in society. Here we discover what it means to be human. This is where we are loved and experience intimacy, meaning and joy, but also where we may experience pain, alienation and abuse. Families reflect all the ambiguities of what it means for human beings to be created in the image of God as good, but also to fall into sin. The heights and depths of the human condition are manifest in family life.

All cultures institutionalize certain understandings of marriage, family and gender, but across cultures, what constitutes a family varies considerably. A family usually is thought of as persons who are related to one another and who live together in a household. This might be a nuclear family, consisting of a couple living alone with or without children. It might be an extended family, made up of additional relatives (such as aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins) who live in the same home or neighborhood. Some families include members who are related not through blood, but through adoption. Due to death, divorce and remarriage, families may include a variety of stepchildren or stepparents. In some societies, more same-sex couples are forming families. "Family" can also refer to a group of people who are committed to share their lives, and who live together without being legally related, such as unmarried couples (whether heterosexual or homosexual), friends, or people living in religious communities.

What for you is "family"? What are the most important qualities or features of family?

However a family is demarcated has implications for who is included and who is excluded, and on what basis. Families can be hospitably open to others, or closed to those who do not belong. The boundaries of family can be experienced as oppressive and exclusive, especially by those who are single or do not fit a particular family norm.

Families are where we are expected to learn our basic sense of justice, especially of what is right and wrong, but they can also be places where blatant injustices rage, especially against those who are vulnerable. Families often need healing due to

How does your church minister to families under these circumstances? How should it?

the deep wounds members inflict upon one another, but families also can be healing havens from the ravages of economic, political and social stress. The silence over what occurs in family life, which is assumed to be private, can become a veil covering the pain and injustices that must be brought into the open if there is to be justice and healing in families.

While many families are content and closely knit, some are not. Indeed, every family has some problems. The private joys and pains of family life must be seen in relation to the wider cultural, social, political and economic realities. When wider social, economic and social systems are threatened or break down, those who do not fit the norm are blamed or seen as dangerous, such as those who are single, divorced, separated, or of a different lifestyle. Other family members, or the wider community, may exclude them on this basis.

Families under stress

There are many pressures on family life, which can contribute to broken relationships and divorce. Family tensions can be compounded by situations of affluence as well as poverty, by unemployment as well as too much work, by changing gender expectations and changing understandings and practices of sexuality. In many parts of the world, families have been subjected to colonialism, forced movement, retrenchment, exploitation, violence, conflict and persisting poverty. When societies are destabilized from every direction, it should be no surprise when there are dramatic increases in the numbers of street children, prostitutes, gangs, crime, rape, abortions, alcohol and drug abuse, child neglect, sexually-transmitted diseases and violence against women, children and other family members.

Consider the pressures of poverty and the resulting problems that the following family faces.

How are families under stress in your context?

"Excuse me; could you give me some money? My little baby is sick." A young woman, carrying her baby, was begging for money from the pastor. Nangula was an eighteen-year-old woman with a two-year-old baby. She also was pregnant. The twenty-five-year-old father of the boy has been living with Nangula since she was sixteen. They have never married. Their son's birth was never registered nor was he baptized.

Nangula's parents live two blocks from their daughter. There are five other siblings living at home, ranging in age from eight to twenty. The entire family is illiterate, although education is available. None of the family members currently have permanent jobs; in the past, they have only had jobs for brief periods of time. Begging is their chief source of income.

The family's physical condition is unhealthy since they often do not have enough money to buy food. They frequently get sick and require medical treatment. Their problems are compounded by the fact that they do not have proper clothing and housing. The family has few options to better their situation, even on a day-to-day basis. The government provides medical treatment only if they have proper papers such as birth certificates or identification cards. The government and church organizations will provide only small amounts of financial assistance. Jobs are difficult to secure. Due to their poor health, they also cannot do heavy work.

What is needed for there to be justice and healing in Nangula's family?

Families amid the HIV/AIDS crisis

The HIV/AIDS pandemic is a poignant example of how these wider forces affect families. Across Africa, and increasingly in other areas of the world, the nightmare of HIV/AIDS is real. The disease affects not only the physical but also the social body, and millions of families within it. Hardly a family remains untouched by HIV/AIDS. The word not spoken is HIV/AIDS, and the sexual and other practices that spread it. Here at ground zero of humanity's deadliest cataclysm, the ultimate tragedy is that so many people do not know—or do not want to know—what is happening. The victims do not cry out. Doctors, clergy and obituaries do not give the killer its name. Families recoil in shame. Leaders shirk responsibility. The stubborn silence heralds victory for the disease: denial cannot keep the virus at bay.

It is in families that death from HIV/AIDS has its greatest impact. The future

of families is bleak in the midst of this pandemic. A loss of a parent, a sibling, a friend, colleague, child or spouse disrupts established family patterns and requires a caring community and ministry. The religious and social stigma is such that family members are subjected to great emotional distress, and carry a large burden of care for those affected. Family life is disrupted, children are orphaned. Families can no longer be sustained under its devastating power. Ironically, some traditional practices of family life may also contribute to its spread.

Although both men and women are affected, increasingly it is women, especially those who are young, who are at far greater risk of being infected through sexual intercourse. Social norms and gender inequality render it difficult for women and girls to negotiate safe sex or to have control over their partner's fidelity. Babies are unwittingly infected by their mothers. Two-thirds of the babies of HIV-positive mothers are born infected.

In light of these tragic realities, will there even be a future generation? Society's fittest, not its frailest, are the ones who die, leaving the old and the children behind. Grandparents and grandchildren are wailing; like Rachel, they refuse to be consoled until life has been genuinely restored (Mt 2:18).

What is needed for there to be justice and healing in families affected by HIV/AIDS? What kinds of cultural taboos need to be overcome if this is to occur? In your culture, who traditionally has taught the young about sexuality? How is this changing? What should be the church's role in this?

The church, as the household of God, needs to acknowledge that this is not just a problem "out there," but that many in our churches are living and suffering with HIV/AIDS. In this sense, it can be said that "the church has AIDS"! Healing is desperately needed so that those affected can be restored to relationships within their families, congregations and communities. We need to become instruments of God's redeeming love so as to confront and transform the stigmas and practices associated with HIV/AIDS.

This includes more open discussion of those practices that spread HIV/AIDS, especially unprotected sexual intercourse under conditions of gender inequality whether within and outside of marriage. Here, the primary ethical mandate is to refrain from doing what will harm the "neighbor" (here, the sexual partner and family members) and to take appropriate measures to protect and enhance the life of the neighbor. In the face of HIV/AIDS, other moral rules or cultural considerations may need to be overruled for the sake of this central mandate.

Especially in the face of this crisis, it is crucial for us to

- tell the truth about what is happening in our lives and communities,
- speak together as adults, youth and children about sexuality and responsible sexual practices,
- teach new ways for women and men to relate to one another, and especially responsible sexual behavior by males.

Changing roles of women and men in families

In many societies, gender roles have undergone significant changes in recent years, especially in quest of greater equity and mutuality between women and men. Women in many parts of the world have acquired a new sense of identity and power, while most men still need to find an identity that is not lived out by exercising dominating power over women, which can lead to abuse. Changing gender expectations and roles is a challenge that most men have only begun to incorporate into their lives and identity as men, including by assuming more responsibilities in home and family. Women still tend to carry the primary responsibility here, in addition to their work outside the home. There also have been significant increases in the proportion of female-headed households, but often with inadequate social, economic, or church support for them and their families. Women in many parts of the world continue to lack

My husband used to work in a far away city and came home only once a month. But a year ago, he came home and did not return to work because he was sick. I looked after him until he died. When I learned that he had AIDS, I knew that I too would soon have it. I am not sick yet but I am worried for our young children who are now, in my opinion, already virtually orphans.

John and Anna have been married for forty years in what their society considers a traditional marriage. He has been employed outside the home, she has not. Their unmarried daughter Leila, who also has a promising career, has lived with three different men, and now is pregnant with her second child. Anna, meanwhile, has tried to keep her children from knowing how many times John has physically beaten her in recent years.

What are the most important gender-related challenges in your society? How is your church addressing them? What can we learn from other churches and societies?

power over their bodies, especially in terms of sexual practices and family planning. As family structures change, especially under the impact of economic forces, children increasingly need to fend for themselves. Quality time spent together as a family is increasingly rare. Who will care for the upcoming generation, as well as for the older generation as they become more dependent?

Love and children without marriage?

In a profound shift that has changed the notion of what constitutes a family in many countries, more and more children, for example, in Europe are born out of wedlock into a new social order in which, it seems, few of the old stigmas will apply. The attitude in Europe is somewhat different from that in the US, where the government recently announced it was actively committed to promoting marriage. Welfare policies in many countries are specifically intended to ensure all children enjoy the same financial benefits and treatment, whether their parents are married, living together, separated, divorced or single. “We have little commitment to the institution of marriage, that’s true, but we do have a commitment to parenthood.”¹

In many parts of the world, people are redefining what “family” means. In many places, divorce does not carry the social stigma it once did. Add to this the

exploding number of single mothers, some of whom have never married and have no plans to; couples with smaller families than their parents, or no children at all; the struggle of homosexual couples for rights similar to their heterosexual counterparts—and there are far different portraits of typical families than existed a generation ago.

How is marriage viewed in your society? How are those viewed who have children outside of marriage? How are families and children supported? How is the church in your context responding to these situations? How should it?

These are only a few of the many changing family realities and challenges present in our communion in different parts of the world. Clearly, there are significant differences in what is occurring, and in how we feel, talk and respond to these realities. Careful and sympathetic listening to one another is essential. Our cross-cultural differences over questions of family, gender and sexuality are widespread and significant; there is no one pattern or answer that can be imposed on all. As we discern how we will respond to the need for justice and healing in and through families today, it is crucial that we do so in light of perspectives and understandings that arise out of our Christian faith.

Biblical perspectives

In the face of all these realities, Christians turn to the Bible in search of guidance.

David and Nina do not feel inclined to declare their love in front of some anonymous official in a municipal building, or in a church. So they have never married—not when they moved in together, not when they bought their first house, not when they had their son, now sixteen.

Sometimes one idealized form of family has been assumed to be the “biblical” or “Christian” model. However, there actually have been many different forms of family throughout the history of the Bible and of the Church (see the Bible study on Ruth for one example of this). Yet, throughout history, marriage generally was seen as a legal and social contract between two families for the sake of status, to bear and raise children and to transfer property from one generation to another.

Families, of many different configurations, are central in the Old Testament. This is reflected, for example, in the direct implications that the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1–17) have for family life, both then and now:

- Family relationships are to be honored and nurtured (“honor your father and mother”).
- Destructive abuses of power that harm others are prohibited (“do not kill”).
- Marriage is to be upheld and supported as a sacred union and social institution (“do not commit adultery”).
- Truth-telling is essential in all relationships (“do not bear false witness”).
- Sexual desire that lures one away from spouse or family is condemned (“do not covet”).

In the biblical world, clear gender assumptions were embedded in the cultural notions of family honor and shame. Male

honor involved taking care of and protecting “weaker” family members, and females were expected to preserve the family’s honor by guarding their own sexual purity. Because they were seen as having “dangerous” power to bring shame on the family, women were controlled and guarded, lest they be seduced or raped by another man, which would bring dishonor upon the family—with little attention to the effect on the woman!² Most of the sexual prohibitions in the Bible tend to be associated either with what was considered impure or “dirty” (according to Levitical codes) or greed in seeking the property and persons who “belong” to another householder.³

How, if at all, do these assumptions still operate in your culture? How do you react to them? On what biblical and theological grounds would you challenge some of them today? Why?

In the Early Church, family loyalties were loosened to some extent for the sake of loyalty to the new community rooted in Christ. This is one reason why the Early Church was seen as threatening to the Roman Empire. The church tended to become like a family, in order to care for those who had cut their ties with their biological families. The ethical focus shifted to relationships within this new “family” of the church.

In the Gospels, Jesus redefines “family”: “whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mk 3:35). Even tax collectors and prostitutes are included in this new family (Mt 21:28–31. Jesus blesses children, “for it is to



such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs” (Mt 19:14). In Jesus Christ, early Christians became “brothers” and “sisters” in a new “household of God” where greater equality among women and men began to emerge, in contrast to the prevalent social pattern of domination. Wives could not be dismissed and divorced as easily as before, and the single life was given new value. Widows, who previously had no status, began to rise above the role of victim and become positive examples of faith, especially in Luke’s Gospel. Honor inherited through one’s blood family was replaced by the honor of doing the will of God.

A highpoint in this new understanding was St. Paul proclaiming that through baptism into Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek ... slave or free ... male or female” (Gal 3:28). Yet, in other Pauline and related writings, especially in the later Pastoral Epistles, understandings of male dominance continued to prevail. The relation of women and men had begun to change dramatically in the first-century church. The exercise by women of this new freedom was shocking to the social system. Conse-

quently, as the church became more established, there were moves away from this new equality, and a reassertion of patriarchal family values.

The Early Church faced the dilemma of how to teach Christian faith and life, especially about matters of family and sexuality, to those from different traditions (such as Jews and Gentiles). This is reflected in the New Testament Epistles and Pastoral Letters. What needed to be emphasized for those from one kind of background was different from what others needed to hear. The church then, as well as today, faced the questions as to which cultural practices regarding family should be affirmed, which ones tolerated and which ones rejected. The sometimes contradictory teachings related to family and sexuality in the Bible reflect this sifting process. It is what we need to continue deliberating, especially in ways that cut across and challenge cultural assumptions, such as those related to polygamy or homosexuality, that are just as controversial in our day.

Paul’s pastoral advice to the church at Corinth contains an extensive section on sexual relationships (1 Cor 5–7). He emphasizes, for example, that the human

Our sexuality is linked to vitality, playfulness, spontaneity, delight, wonder, celebration, procreation and creativity of all kinds, a profound affirmation of life. To deny a person's sexuality is to put a lid on energy and life.⁴

body is a “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:19–20), which has important implications for how we live out our sexuality. He offers surprising, sometimes conflicting, advice in relation to situations Christians faced. His realistic pastoral guidance affirms the importance of more mutual relations within marriage, while also affirming those who remained single. What begins to emerge is the ethical principle of judging behavior according to what will result in the least harm to self and neighbor in particular situations, rather than upholding certain absolute rules under all circumstances. Today, this principle has become increasingly central in Lutheran perspectives on family and sexuality.

Central theological themes in Scripture are foundational, but questions need to be raised about ethical teachings that are bound to certain cultural understandings and assumptions, and how they may or may not apply in situations today. The community of faith is called to talk and discern together how we should live our lives as finite moral agents, who sin and are forgiven and ultimately are responsible to God.

What are the central ethical teachings that should prevail amid changing cultural realities?

Sexuality

In the Hebrew Scriptures, sexual activity is viewed quite positively. In the beginning of Genesis we read that God created humankind male and female (Gen 1:27) and “indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). In the Bible, the often overlooked Song of Songs celebrates the joys of erotic, sexual pleasure. Human sexuality was created good for the purposes of

expressing love and generating life, for mutual companionship and pleasure. At the same time, marred by sin, it can lead to deep pain, frustration and harm.

Throughout much of church history, sexual activity was seen as a concession to human weakness, and a life of celibacy was valued above marriage. Martin Luther was among those who helped to liberate sexuality from the prison of a dualism that regarded “spirit” as good and “flesh” (and thus sexuality) as ugly, bad and sinful. The Reformers made a special effort to restore sexuality as a pleasurable aspect of God’s good creation, rather than viewing it only in relation to sin. Luther declared “that God gave us and implanted into our bodies genitals, blood vessels, fluids, and everything else necessary” for sexual partnership. Preventing sexual activity is “preventing nature from being nature.”⁵ Thus Luther abandoned celibacy, married, had children and enjoyed family life.

Sexuality is deeply infused with cultural meanings that vary over time and place. What is considered “natural” (or “common sense,” “the way things are”) in some cultures may feel quite unnatural or even revolting in others. What is “natural” is embedded with cultural assumptions that vary over time and place. This is why caution must be exercised in how categories such as “natural” or “orders of creation” are used with regard to sexuality, especially when they are used as categories of power that exclude those who do not fit a prescribed order of what is considered natural. What is regarded as different from a

How is sexuality viewed in your context? How, if at all, is it talked about in your church? How should it be?

given norm, especially what disturbs the predictable order of things, is considered “unnatural” and on that basis, often judged to be immoral. For example, the subordination of women or the separation of races through slavery or apartheid has, in the past, been considered natural, based on the orders of creation.

Discuss some examples of what is considered natural in some contexts but unnatural in others. As you do so, pay careful attention to the different cultural perceptions and reactions that are involved. What are some common convictions that move beyond these differences?

From the perspective of the new life in Christ, we are able to move beyond these categories and focus instead on what will best express love and compassion for “the neighbor” in whatever cultural context we find ourselves. Power used in ways that exclude or abuse others is wrong in any context. What challenges does this raise in your context?

Ethical perspectives to consider today

By focusing on the network of relationships in which human beings find themselves, the focus on justice and healing in families has much to contribute to how we pursue Christian ethics. Theological

themes in Scripture can guide our decision making, but they do not by themselves tell us what to do in the particular situations we face. Here decisions need to be made by people as finite moral agents responsible to God. As Christians, we should honor the teachings contained in the Holy Scriptures while being open to challenges based on social existence, with norms of love, inclusiveness and mutual acceptance of each other. In a spirit of joy and gladness, we are called to seek justice and healing in and through all kinds of families.

Consider how the following ethical perspectives could be helpful in addressing the challenges facing families and sexuality in your context:

- God intends human beings to find personal meaning and healing through family relationships. Relationships should be evaluated according to whether they are mutually just, loving and promote personal and social flourishing. In the case of intimate sexual activity, what is ethically significant is the qualitative nature of the relationship within which this occurs, and whether this activity builds up and enhances, or harms and destroys the life of the other (the sexual partner, the family, the community).
- Marriage is a union between two people that embodies God’s loving purpose to nurture, create and enrich life, through a lifelong relationship of mutual love, fidelity

This relational understanding is similar to the African concept of *ubuntu*. Being human is always in relation to other persons, as well as animals, plants and the earth. To describe a person as “having *ubuntu*” means that she or he is a caring person who is living as a responsible citizen, caring for others and worshipping God. Values such as justice, respect, honesty and the equality of all peoples are highlighted. Such a person remains a person, as long as she or he is embedded in the solidarity of the community, regardless of her or his condition, situation or deeds. If this social body is threatened, then the whole existence of a people, or the survival of the human race is endangered.

Share some of the cultural/community practices, pastoral care approaches and congregational programs that are helpful for healing families in your context.

and joy. The binding legal contract of marriage reinforces its “staying power” when it is threatened by sin. At the same time, compassion and healing are needed in those situations where a marriage may need to be ended.

- Through conceiving, bearing, adopting and rearing children, a family participates in God’s ongoing creation. Both parents should be prepared to welcome, take care of and provide for a child. When that is not the case, the responsible use of safe, effective contraceptive methods are expected of both sexual partners. Special attention must be paid to the unequal power in sexual relations, and the lack of access that women often have to contraception and protection against sexually-transmitted diseases.
- As believers whose lives have been marked by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we should respond to the hope that is in us by living out a faith active in love that seeks justice. The core issue is that justice be done in any type of family. Furthermore, we must challenge the unjust, dominating use of power over others, including male dominance over females in family and sexual relations, especially when this results in various forms of abuse.⁶

What policies are needed for the sake of greater justice for families in your society? For what kinds of policies should the Lutheran communion be advocating?

- A Lutheran ethic of family and sexuality seeks to be practical and realistic, recognizing that what we do in this world will never be free of sin. We are called to use our God-given sense and judgement to discern what will best approximate who we are as part of the household of God, and how the life of the neighbor can best be protected and enhanced. In living this out, we must continually rely on God’s grace and forgiveness.

Healing of and justice for families

Given all the stress and wounds afflicting families, there are enormous needs for healing, many of which are specific to a given context. How families are healed in different cultures and settings will vary significantly.

For justice in families—of whatever kind—it would be well to remember the words of prophet Micah: “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8). The joy of being a family of God makes us “a Christ” to others, enabling us to engage joyfully in ministries of healing and justice in the world. This includes faith (walking with God) and good works (doing justice and loving kindness). Being justified by faith through grace leads us to pursuing love and justice for the neighbor.

Given the highly charged differences there are about families and sexuality in our world today, we can be sure that as we discuss these matters, “our shoes will get muddy.” But at the same time, we pray for the grace to avoid unfairly judging those with whom we differ, the patience to listen to those with whom we disagree, and the love to reach out to those from whom we may be divided.

Notes

¹ Kari Moxnes of the University at Trondheim, quoted in “To more Europeans, love doesn’t mean marriage,” *International Herald Tribune*, 25 March, 2002, p. 15.

² Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and Household Churches* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), pp. 38–42.

³ L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

⁴ Niloufer Harben, “Dancing Towards the Light: Some Perspectives on Sexuality and Spirituality,” in *In God’s Image: Journal of Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology*, vol. 20:3 (2001), p. 14.

⁵ Eric W. Gritsch and Helmut T. Lehmann (eds.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 39 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 297.

⁶ For more on this, see *Churches Say “No” to Violence Against Women* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2002).

