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## OPINION PIECE

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### CHANGING FAMILIES – CHALLENGES FOR OUR COMMUNITIES

“During a recent overseas holiday to the UK and Germany, my partner and I availed ourselves of the hospitality of various relatives and friends. This included a wide range of household types: a married couple in their seventies with grown-up children living locally and overseas; a de facto couple both previously divorced, aged in their mid to late 50s and with children living locally and overseas; a male same-sex couple in their late 30s; a married couple in their late 20s with no children; another married couple in their late 50s with children overseas, and finally a household of two adults and four children, comprising a de facto couple (male early 60s, female late 30s) both previously divorced with a teenage daughter from a previous marriage, two foster children aged 12 and 8, and their own daughter aged 3.”

(Peter Burke, The Magdalene Centre, Anglicare SA)

Families get interesting press these days. The popular press, television, community advertising and government publications have no difficulty promoting an image of happy families and family life in Australia, where ‘family’ comprises Mum and Dad and a couple of kids. At the same time there are frequent stories of family life in complete disarray - relationship breakdowns, divorce, bitter child custody disputes and new partnerships, domestic violence and family abuse – especially where these involve the rich and famous. The relentless reporting of the affairs of the British royal family is one such commentary on the complexities and problems – and expectations – surrounding families today.

The reality, as illustrated in the opening anecdote, is that families today are undergoing rapid change, and the image of stable family life is – for many – illusory. This is one of the most far-reaching social changes of the last thirty years, manifesting itself in many ways – the reduction in the marriage rate, the rise in the divorce rate, the increase in and social acceptability of ‘living together’, the high proportion of single parent families and the preponderance of households with only one or two adults. Where once the word ‘family’ conveyed a sharp mental picture, it no longer does so. And however people view this change, they know it is of the utmost importance - for families, however defined, are at the core of our society.

Changes in family composition and family life are factual and cannot be disputed. But there are great differences in the way they are viewed.

There is of course a spectrum of views. At one end are those who look back fondly to the remembered or fancied time of the 1960s where two parents and two children lived out their contented lives together; at the other are those who embrace wholeheartedly the changes in the family, and want to accelerate them.

Anglicare Australia’s ‘State of the Family 2005’, released this week, does not take sides in the debate about what families should or shouldn’t look like. Rather it reflects on the implications of the changing nature of families in Australia today on our communities and social fabric, and in particular on those individuals and families who experience particular disadvantage, stress or marginalisation.

The 43 agencies of the Anglicare Australia network expend over \$500 million each year on assistance to families, young people, children, aged, unemployed and homeless Australians, as well as working with Indigenous Australians to overcome disadvantage.

The community, and that includes the churches and their caring agencies, cannot afford to turn its back on families that do not conform to a particular ideal or to emerging forms of family life. As the church, or any social institution, endeavours to remain relevant to the Australian community it needs to address the issues that underlie separation, divorce and family breakdown. Blame and taking the high moral ground on a particular form of family life fail to address those things that diminish individuals and hold back their growth, development and potential to contribute to community life. There are many hurting families around us, some in contact with the churches, others with community support agencies, experiencing the pain that comes from violence, personal crisis, loneliness, financial stress, alienation or lack of fulfilment.

The churches too, get mixed press from the Australian media. Only infrequently do we see or hear reported the enduring, compassionate, optimistic response of the churches' caring agencies to the families whose daily life is one of struggle, disadvantage and pain – families who are misunderstood, avoided or even rejected by their neighbours. And even less frequently mentioned is the critique of government policies and community trends that fail to redress inequity and injustice – as voiced by these same agencies and churches.

The message from governments, business and indeed much of the community is that Australia is a terrific place to live in – and for most of us, it is. The reportedly buoyant economy, low unemployment, widespread prosperity and longer, healthier lives of its citizens should cheer us all. It's not surprising that words like poverty, disadvantage, inequity and injustice don't register on many people's radar.

But if we look more closely we should be surprised. If so many people are doing so well, why don't we as a community show greater compassion for the 21% of Australians who live on less than \$400 a week? Why don't we jump up and down and demand a better future for the 20% of households where children are brought up with no adult in paid employment? And why aren't we outraged that indigenous men can expect to live to only 56, dying 21 years younger than other Australian men?

Of course, governments and communities do provide a safety net and some level of care to these people. But it's not until we are able to immerse ourselves in the daily lives of disadvantaged families that we can realise that living through each day can be a relentless struggle.

Anglicare Australia's 'State of the Family 2005' tells us some of these stories, bringing the gaunt statistics to life. But more than this – the stories offer glimmers of hope for families, and for the heart and soul of communities. Working alongside families, sharing their hardships and their triumphs, staff and volunteers of the Anglican Church's biggest workforce know that anything is possible – as those whose stories feature in this report now know.

Why does a church devote its energies to such endeavours? 'State of the Family 2005' reflects on the driving force behind this work with families – in all their configurations. That driving force is hope – life-giving hope, expressed as love, compassion, inclusiveness and healing. That hope is further demonstrated when people throughout the church are able to disregard any differences they may have, accepting that this leads to a selfless and loving care for others.

Who should read this book? It will be uplifting for committed Anglicans to learn more of what is being done on their behalf. It will enlighten members of the community who may not realise how effectively churches can work without pushing a divisive agenda. It will inform governments, which are committed to a society based on the wellbeing of families. And it will offer insight into the real world of many Australian families for those who seek to report real life issues to the public.

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Anglicare Australia's 'State of the Family 2005' is available on [www.anglicare.asn.au](http://www.anglicare.asn.au), or by emailing [anglicare@anglicare.asn.au](mailto:anglicare@anglicare.asn.au).