

# Family Perspectives

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***For the past two decades, the Lilly Endowment has supported several projects among religious institutions designed to empower and serve families. This work has helped to shape discussions, policy-making, scholarship, ministries, and practices on national and local levels alike. This essay sketches out some of these efforts, exploring along the way, how attention to families can affect visions of ministry, communities, and the larger society.***

## Introduction

In September of 2000, a wildly diverse group of over fifty people came together in the heart of the nation to hammer out a public policy statement addressing what may be the only concern they held in common: families. With philanthropic funding and corporate sponsorship alike, community and religious leaders, academics and scholars, policy makers, journalists, program directors, family and child advocates, and more met in Kansas City. Muslims, Jews, and Christians, conservatives, liberals, and radicals, those from helping professions and those suspicious of them, all had something to say. After three days of intense debate and under the leadership of Don Browning and Gloria Rodriquez, the group managed to find enough common ground to publish a statement entitled, *Strengthening American Families: Reweaving the Social Tapestry*.<sup>1</sup> In the words of its Preamble:

*In spite of a wide range of problems facing families and some predictions that they are less important for modern society, we affirm their continuing vital role for the present and future social fabric. Therefore, we hold that public policy should give careful attention to the needs of families. To do this requires a complex weaving together of innovative responses from business and labor, government, the educational system at all levels, civil society, faith-based organizations, community-based organizations, and the media.*

This meeting of the 97<sup>th</sup> American Assembly, an organization established by President Dwight Eisenhower and affiliated with Columbia University, was a large-scale example of similar kinds of meetings occurring all over the nation, illustrating a new

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<sup>1</sup> Publicly available online at <http://www.americanassembly.org>

wave of concern about the well-being of families. The conviction gathering such a diverse array of leaders together was that, underneath any agenda, ideology, or perspective represented, families matter.

### Realms of Concern

As individuals most of us can name reasons why our own families matter to us. Roots, love, financial support, shared commitments, companionship, and care are but a few of the possible and positive reasons family life is meaningful at any age. But of course there are plenty of negative aspects to family life—disappointments, oppressive expectations, enduring conflicts, infidelities, ruptures, and endings, for example—yet these matter to us too, just as much if not more, because when they occur they sting so deeply. Good and bad, our families are sources of deep meaning in our lives; they matter more than we can say.

But the conviction at work in this particular American Assembly was not only that our own families matter, but also that *other families matter*. That is, communities, governments, religious institutions, corporations, foundations, schools, and in short—society—has deep stakes in the well-being of families. And while the Lilly Endowment was only one of several underwriters of the event and Don Browning was only one of the fifty-plus people gathered, both have played key leadership roles in trying to help others pay attention to how much families matter to the social fabric, if not the soul, of a nation. Both the Endowment and Browning have donated tremendous amounts of energy and resources towards supporting programs, research, leadership, education, scholarship, and publications that are in turn intended to support marriages and families, as well as family-concerned ministries.

Significant is the fact that these efforts have been tied to religious institutions. Lilly’s Religion Division has recognized that the faith world has a huge role to play in the lives of families and the congregations that are composed of them. In turn these efforts have been intensifying attention given to families not only in Catholic and evangelical circles, where it has been strong, but within the mainline Protestant world as well where such attention had been weak in the preceding decades. In other words, because these are efforts within religious communities, undergirded by theological perspectives, it could be said that families are not only a matter of personal and social concern, but appear to be all tangled up in matters of ultimate concern as well.

The simple truth is that to deal with families is to deal with nearly anything and everything. At nearly every turn—personal, public, religious—anything and everything has an impact upon family life and vice versa. On the one hand, few would argue with this. On the other, the ubiquitous nature of family creates quite an overwhelming quandary when things seem to go wrong and problems arise. That is, considering all the possibilities for work and attention, where on earth should concerned folk look? When policy-makers get together around family issues, or when congregations decide to initiate a family ministry program, they have to deal precisely with this quandary.

How to begin? Where to focus? What’s helpful? What can we do? What are others doing? Why is there even a problem?

It is on this front, perhaps, that an overview of some of the specific major projects that the Lilly Endowment has supported can be most helpful. By paying attention to some of the directions, analyses, philosophies, and particular programs that have been supported and carried out over the past fifteen to twenty years, possibly others who are also concerned about families can find some direction and inspiration. All of the projects, even while keeping an eye on the larger picture, eventually land somewhere specific—a conference on marriage, a book about faithful parenting, an assessment tool for a congregation, teaching a family ministry course in a seminary. The big picture reveals why such concrete efforts matter in the long run, even while such specific actions help make family concerns and hopes real.

So, with these issues in mind, this essay now turns to some of those efforts and projects.

### **Shifting the Focus to Families**

While the foundation world generally has supported what could be argued to be family-related projects for decades, often these have been particularly focused upon children and youth, and often have had no particular connection to religious institutions. The Carnegie Council on Children in the 1970’s is an illustrative example. The Council focused particularly upon children’s cognitive development, asking as a guiding question, “What is the relationship between the nature of contemporary American society and child development?” They tried to answer this question in the landmark report *All Our Children: The American Family under Pressure*, and along the way noticed how changing family configurations, technology, jobs and wages, health care, and politics in general affect something as specific as a particular child’s mind.<sup>2</sup> Religion or religious institutions, however, are not mentioned.

Herein lies the particular contribution of the Lilly Endowment’s religious grant-making in relation to families: seeing and appreciating the possible contributions to be made in this work through theological scholarship and education, through pastoral leadership, and through life together in communities of faith where a unique perspective upon families, a kind of wisdom even, may be at work. Lilly too, historically, has a long history of supporting work and ministries oriented to children and youth (organizations like Father Flannigan’s, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and Young Life, for example). Programs such as these, while focused upon helping troubled young people or upon forming religious identity in adolescence, were not generally focusing their efforts upon public policy-making or even families as such. If anything, many of these

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Keniston and the Carnegie Council on Children. *All Our Children: The American Family under Pressure*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977). The quote is from p. ix.

programs functioned more along the lines of either surrogate families or surrogate congregations.

An exception to this general rule can be found in the work of the Children’s Defense Fund, clearly a public policy advocacy organization, and in 1988 it received a grant to help host a conference on “the black family.” Another exception would be the National Council of Churches, which in 1990 received a grant to support leadership education for those in black congregational ministries working with black families. In retrospect these efforts would seem to represent a transition to the kinds of work that Lilly would support in the years to come, some oriented to public policy-making, some oriented to congregational leadership, and all addressing families as a concern of religious institutions.

### ***Religion, Culture, and the Family Project***

By far the most ambitious efforts drawing Lilly support have come from the University of Chicago’s *Religion, Culture, and the Family Project* (RCF), under the leadership of Professor Browning of the Divinity School. The Project began in 1991, the same year that Don and Carol Browning, together, published an article in *Christian Century* entitled, *The Church and the Family Crisis: A New Love Ethic*.<sup>3</sup> The article foreshadows some of the major themes that will be played out more thoroughly in the RCF project, especially an emphasis upon marriage and the task of raising children.

While acknowledging a growing transformation in the forms family life can take—blended families, co-habiting couples, gay and lesbian couples, and childless families for example—and while acknowledging the importance of the church ministering to all of them, this article warns that efforts toward inclusivity should not “obscure the church’s *central* support for the intact mother-father team dedicated to the task of raising children to take their place in the kingdom of God.”<sup>4</sup> They suggest that the primary task of families is that of raising children.

Only families are responsible for providing the security, stability, financial resources, stimulation and commitment necessary to raise highly dependent human infants to adulthood. Furthermore families are the primary carriers of the traditions, narratives, values and the initial education necessary to raise children to be conscientious citizens and members in the kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

So, even though the Brownings are not suggesting that all married couples should have children, they do raise questions regarding definitions, that is, whether childless couples should be called “family.” In addition, they also recommend caution for other uses of the term—the “church family” for example. As a metaphor, it’s okay,

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<sup>3</sup> *Christian Century*, 108, no. 23, August 7-14, 1991, pp. 746-749.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 747.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

they were saying, but let’s be clear whence the metaphor is drawn, and who really, really has responsibility, when push comes to shove, for raising children.

The attempt to define and delimit family in relation to one particular task may have simply been a strategic one, that is, a way to provide a rationale and motivation for supporting the task of raising children and for supporting the form of relationship that seems best suited for the task, if there is one. And there is, according to their review of the sociological research literature; as in architecture, form follows function. That form is the intact, legally married couple.

Not surprisingly, many would come to criticize this emphasis upon family form or structure, or the act of relying primarily upon a sociological lens—a view, at least here, that tends to address large patterns in large populations, and obscure exceptions and idiosyncrasies. But despite the criticism, the Brownings had a point to be reckoned with: on a large scale, when it comes to families, form is highly correlated with function and therefore with the well-being of a large population of children. Whether or not this was the best tack to take, it did set the direction for many of the particular types of efforts that were to follow from the RCF, especially in relation to public policy making as well as the recommendations that were to come for congregational ministries. In addition, by defining families in such a way and then by comparing the definition to the rapidly growing divorce (non-intact) rates among American marriages in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the family could be deemed “in crisis.”

This approach, whether strategic, research-inspired, or simply a matter of conviction, did however, have some drawbacks. The primary one was that it raised the hackles of many in the mainline church and liberal theological worlds, of which Don Browning is very much a part, and to whom the article was addressing. This was particularly true among advocates of increased inclusion, justice, and diversity in community and religious life, folk who pay a lot of attention to exceptions and differences. To sharply define a family along nuclear, mother-father, childbearing lines, was to rub many people the wrong way and provoked, and still provokes, all kinds of “responses to Don Browning.”<sup>6</sup> Additional explanations of the crisis, as it was further analyzed (described below), created even more heat and resistance. While the heat drew attention and created a sense of urgency in relation to families—a call to action—it also raised more concerns over the direction the RCF project was heading among those who were already worried.

Two years later, Don Browning and Ian Evison, co-writing for *Christian Century*, outlined some of the major causes of this crisis from their point of view: economic hardships, increasingly individualistic values, eroding family law, and father absence were named as key factors. By naming such causes they were clearly raising the

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<sup>6</sup> A sharp example of a printed response to Browning’s work can be found in Homer Ashby’s “The State of the Family: A Response to Don Browning,” *Christian Century*, 120 no. 20, October 4, 2003, pp. 47-49.

importance of public policy, law making, and cultural values in relation to the well-being of family life. And while there would be few arguments with the left when it comes to the deleterious effects of market forces and individualism in the social fabric, including families, the question of whether no-fault divorce is a blessing or a curse or to what extent fathers matter was more complicated. “The single most important trend in American families today,” write Browning and Evison, “is the increasing absence of fathers and the feminization of kinship.” They go on.

*By feminization of kinship we mean that the families of children are increasingly composed of women—the mothers, grandmothers and aunts who do the child care. Men are increasingly absent from families and their children. Social scientists report that fathers of out-of-wedlock children and divorced fathers give surprisingly little economic or emotional support to their biological children.<sup>7</sup>*

To some this was simply the truth—women shoulder too heavy of a burden and men need to step up. At last someone in the liberal protestant world is bold enough to say it. But when, only the year before, Vice President Dan Quayle had blamed “Murphy Brown” as part of the problem, such statements can begin to sound more like blaming women and less like a call for men to take more responsibility. In addition, they could be interpreted as undervaluing the care and effort extended by these same women who are carrying the load, implying that their feminine care is somehow inadequate—overlooking along the way all the success stories of children raised by single mothers. To top matters off, the statements could be heard as slighting or ignoring all the responsible men who are in fact fully engaged in the lives of their children. To the critics, Browning was sounding a bit too much like this growing bunch of “Promise Keepers,” and by association, standing a little too close to patriarchy and/or homophobia.

To some it was about time, to others it was going back in time. In general though, it seems that many more people did not know what time it was. That is, folk in the white, liberal protestant world, didn’t know what to think about such talk. Evangelicals talk about family and raising children, Catholics talk about it—the U.S. Bishops issued a powerful statement about the family in the 1980’s.<sup>8</sup> Leaders in African-American churches and communities were talking about it. But not white protestant mainliners. Reticence regarding family talk had reigned in recent decades, with only a couple of exceptions. Family concerns tended to be relegated to therapy in the personal realm and into the politics of abortion or sexual orientation in more public conversations. Don Browning and the RCF Project were changing this.

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<sup>7</sup> Don Browning and Ian Evison, “The Family Debate: A Middle Way,” *Christian Century*, 110, no. 21, July 14-21, 1993, p. 713.

<sup>8</sup> The most recent edition is *A Family Perspective in Church and Society*, (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1998).

Perhaps the greatest service provided by the RCF project was that, over time, supporters of Browning’s ideas and critics of them alike, along with Browning himself, gained plenty of opportunities to debate perspectives, explore new ideas, marshal scholarship and research, critique public policies, generate new directions of advocacy, and discuss all kinds of challenges to and resources for the well-being of family life in the United States. The RCF created opportunities for this work on multiple fronts by generating books and series of books, by hosting and supporting scholarly conferences, by generating symposia and think tank opportunities, by creating public policy positions, and in general by focusing sustained attention upon families. Often these occurred in collaboration with other groups and institutes, such as the American Assembly already mentioned, or the Institute for American Values, or the Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education.<sup>9</sup> So, regardless of whether or not the specific analysis of this “family crisis” was on target, regardless of clashing worldviews or political strategies, in all, with the help of the Lilly Endowment, Browning began creating the space for serious work that ultimately stretches far beyond the ideas and imagination of any one person, analysis, or viewpoint.

Even a cursory look at the following titles and authors reveals the range of work and diversity of outlook connected to the RCF project. First there is the *Family, Religion, and Culture Series* published by Westminster John Knox Press and edited by Browning and Evison.

1. *Covenant and Commitments*. Max Stackhouse. (1996)
2. *For the Love of Children: Genetic Technology and the Future of the Family*. Ted Peters. (1996)
3. *Faith Traditions and the Family*. Edited by Phyllis Airhart and Margaret Bendroth. (1996)
4. *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition*. John Witte. (1997)
5. *Families in Ancient Israel*. Leo Perdue, John Collins, Carol Meyers, and Joseph Blenkinsopp. (1997)
6. *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*. David Balch and Carolyn Osiek. (1997)
7. *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*. Co-authored by Don Browning, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Pam Couture, K. Brynolf (Bernie) Lyon, and Robert Franklin. 1997. Second edition, 2000.
8. *Religion, Feminism, and the Family*. Edited by Anne Carr and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen. (1998)
9. *Tending the Flock: Congregations and Family Ministry*. K. Brynolf Lyon and Archie Smith. (1998)
10. *The Family Handbook*. Edited by Herbert Anderson, Don Browning, Ian Evison, and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen. (1998)

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<sup>9</sup> For example, see *The Marriage Movement: A Statement of Principles*, (Institute for American Values, 2000) as an example of such collaborative efforts.

After this series came another, the *Religion, Marriage, and Family Series* published by Eerdmans Press and initially edited by Browning, John Wall, and David Clairmont, and then later edited by Don Browning and John Witte.

1. *More Lasting Unions: Christianity, the Family, and Society*. Stephen Post. (1999)
2. *Childhood in Christian Theology*. Marcia Bunge. (2000)
3. *The Book of Marriage: The Wisest Answers to the Toughest Questions*. Edited by Dana Mack and David Blankenhorn. (2001)
4. *Marriage, Health, and the Professions: If Marriage is Good for You, What Does This Mean for Law, Medicine, Ministry, Therapy, and Business?* Edited by John Wall, Don Browning, William Doherty, and Stephen Post. (2002)
5. *Marriage: Just a Piece of Paper?* Edited by Katherine Anderson, Don Browning, and Brian Boyer. (2002)
6. *Marriage and Modernization: How Globalization Threatens Marriage and What to Do About It*. Don Browning. (2003)
7. *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*. Edited by David Balch and Carolyn Osiek. (2003)
8. *Does Christianity Teach Male Headship? The Equal-Regard Marriage and Its Critics*. Edited by David Blankenhorn, Don S. Browning, and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen. (2004)
9. *The Morality of Adoption: Social-Psychological, Theological, and Legal Perspectives*. Edited by Timothy P. Jackson. (2005)
10. *Covenant Marriage in Comparative Perspective*. Edited by John Witte and Eliza Ellison. (2005)
11. *Sex, Marriage, and Family in John Calvin's Geneva I: Courtship, Engagement, Marriage*. John Witte and Robert Kingdom. (2005)
12. *Christian Ethics and the Moral Psychologies*. Don Browning (2006)
13. *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers in Modern Societies*. Don Browning. (2007)
14. *The Mystery of the Child*. Martin Marty. (2007)

And if you go the RCF website<sup>10</sup> you will discover hundreds more articles and books that are “inspired by or produced directly for the RCF project,” not to mention the PBS documentary *Marriage—Just a Piece of Paper*, hosted by Cokie Roberts (and aired nationally in 2002).<sup>11</sup>

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It is impossible to adequately summarize the effects of all this work for the church, scholarship, or society. There have been hundreds, if not thousands of people

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<sup>10</sup> <http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/research/rcfp>

<sup>11</sup> Browning's *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers in Modern Societies*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), mentioned in the list, is a particularly helpful collection of previously published writings.

involved one way or another—including many of those whose hackles were raised initially—so no one can really measure its impact or predict how long it will endure or what kinds of ripples will continue. It is also impossible to summarize all the ideas and policy recommendations that flow from this body of work. Nonetheless, even though nobody knows when or where these ideas may take deep root or fully bloom, it may be helpful to highlight a few of them, especially focal themes that seem to pervade the writings and publications in which Browning himself has been most involved.

One of the best summaries of these ideas can be found in the book, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*, co-authored with Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Pamela Couture, Brynolf Lyon, and Robert Franklin six years after that first *Christian Century* article. The book spells out in better detail some of the core ideas that Browning had offered earlier in addresses and articles and it also utilizes much of the research and many of the insights gathered in the other books of the Westminster John Knox series. The book offers a complex, yet clear, diagnosis of the problem, the “family crisis” and begins to address some of the sharper criticisms of previous work by expanding and clarifying what the underlying concerns really are. For example, while the emphasis upon defining precisely what a family is diminishes somewhat in this book, the underlying concern about raising children has not. What follows then, are some of the key dimensions of this and related concerns<sup>12</sup>:

1) *Marriage.*

One of the strongest areas of concern has to do with marriage. Soaring rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock births, as the authors describe them, combine with poverty and father absence to create extremely fragile arrangements for caring for and raising children. Parenting is hard work. It drains time and energy, it is emotionally and financially demanding, and in all it is difficult to do alone—even though many single-parent families manage to succeed. But, children are far more likely to thrive in school and stay out of trouble when they have two parents in the home actively engaged in their lives. The goal, the authors assert, is twofold, “to help single mothers succeed while enhancing the conditions that create and preserve intact families.”<sup>13</sup>

2) *Work.*

The economic transformations of modern capitalist society have not served families well. Ever-increasing demands for efficiency and productivity in the marketplace lay ever-increasing pressures upon family time. “Face-to-face encounters are reduced to means-ends interactions,” the authors say, and the “intimate, I-thou relations of families and small communities are overtaken by

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<sup>12</sup> Forms of many of the same points were raised in earlier articles by Browning alone. See especially, “Christian Ethics and the Family Debate: An Overview,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 1995, pp. 251-262.

<sup>13</sup> *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*, p. 54.

the logic of efficiency.”<sup>14</sup> Family time is inefficient, yet time—lots of it together—is precisely what families need to nurture relationships.

3) *Individualism.*

Compounding the economic situation with its emphasis on pursuing individual choices and personal gain is the more general cultural emphasis upon the individual and self-concern, according to the authors. When under-girded by the deeper realities of human anxiety and sin, the result is “to make personal human relations, in or out of marriage and the family, increasingly subordinate to our individual satisfactions” as well as “increasingly subject to the cost-benefit mentality of the market.”<sup>15</sup> But a “family perspective” (as the U.S. bishops called it) values relationships—marriages, friendships, and communities—and tends to them, offering a counterbalance to individual concern.

4) *Male Psychology.*

The authors point to the work of Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin to make a case that children—boys and girls alike—tend to overidentify with mothers when fathers are distant or isolated from parenting (by work or divorce for example). The argument is that this dynamic makes growing up more difficult for young people, and can impair their ability to identify with adults of either sex. (In turn this makes friendships and healthy marriages more difficult for them). This all has a roundabout way of reinforcing patriarchal structures that further distant fathers from nurturing roles and attachment to families. Combine this distancing of fathers with what the authors see as an evolutionary tendency for male mammals to roam away anyway—the “male problematic”—then fatherhood is in a perpetually precarious position. This is why, as the authors see it, nearly every society creates cultural patterns and incentives (e.g. rituals, laws, practices) that intend to help bind fathers to the family. The argument then is, that far from helping women, a society that makes divorce easy or out of wedlock births unproblematic is actually perpetuating the vicious cycle that loads the burden for parenting and relationships generally upon women and allows men to continue to roam unattached.

5) *Equal-regard.*

The book, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* is committed to a new ideal for the family, one that promotes “equal regard” in relation to marriage partners, “characterized by mutual respect, affection, practical assistance, and justice.”<sup>16</sup> Don and Carol Browning wrote about this in that first *Christian Century* article, considering “equal regard” to be an extension of the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

theological idea and ethic of neighbor love. Equal regard represents a new ideal for the family, particularly for marriages, and intends to avoid the excesses of either individual concern or self-sacrifice and hopes to better address the pressures and realities of postmodern families.<sup>17</sup> So while equal-regard is a democratization of marriage roles and duties, more importantly from a theological point of view, equal-regard is to practice love in the most concrete ways.

### Constructive Efforts

Obviously not all who are worried about families would agree with the entire analysis and set of concerns offered through the RCF Project; there is something here to upset nearly every perspective. And some would even say that casting the issues in terms of a “problem” or “crisis” is itself problematic. Lisa Cahill, for example, an ethicist and a contributor to the RCF Project, says that she can agree that families are in crisis only if properly qualified.

*The crisis in American families looks different for women compared to men, for people of color compared to whites, and for the chronically undereducated and unemployed compared to the middle class. Divorce and births to poor, teenaged mothers are in fact bad signs for families. But the family crisis has other social and economic roots that are just as truly matters of Christian moral concern as are narcissistic individualism and unwillingness to make and keep commitments.*<sup>18</sup>

Whether “crisis” or “problem” is the proper casting or not, the advantage is that it encourages concern and invites constructive solutions. Many of these as well are spelled out in *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* (and other places) and they include:

- A call for more marriage education and fatherhood initiatives as part of a general effort to support marriage.
- A call to revisit divorce laws, especially no-fault varieties.
- A call for better childcare support or payments, a parental bill of rights, job training programs, tax-credits, and in short, something like the GI bill for parenting.
- Encouraging more family-friendly work policies: for example, generous parental leaves and health benefits, flex-time and job sharing, and encouraging a 60 hour work week split (e.g. 30-30, 40-20) between two parents.

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<sup>17</sup> “The Church and the Family Crisis: A New Love Ethic,” *Christian Century*, 108 no. 23, August 7-14, 1991, p. 749.

<sup>18</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill. *Family: A Christian Social Perspective*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

- A call for the institutions of civil society to launch a major critique of the images of marriage and family portrayed in media and pop culture.<sup>19</sup>

Most of these recommendations are played out on the fields of law and policy-making, corporate culture, educational institutions, and the media. However the authors do see the church and religious institutions as playing an important role as well, namely, to be advocates for these kinds of movements and reforms. In other words, one of the main jobs for churches in relation to families is to use their influence to push for such changes. Nonetheless, there are a few suggestions that have more to do with the particular nature of religious communities and are not simply a matter of public advocacy. These include:

- Claiming and retrieving the rich history of marriage and family traditions, helping to encourage marriage and sustain it among their own members.
- Reclaiming the tradition of family as “little church,” that is, recognizing home as a crucial location for worship, spiritual disciplines, and religious formation.
- Providing opportunities for marriage and family education and enrichment and better preparing couples for marriage, since most people are married in churches and synagogues.
- Developing programs that support multiple family forms (e.g. single parents, divorced, gay and lesbian partners).
- Working harder to address divorce through care and counseling efforts.
- Doing more to promote the role of fathers in parenting.

Many of these ideas, especially on the public-policy front, show up in other places—such as the statement produced by the American Assembly—which not only reveals the influence Browning and the RCF Project have had, but may also reveal how well he and the project, regardless of disagreements, have in fact been able to create some *common ground* for constructive support of families. While the project is now officially complete, it is clear that these efforts have put concerns about families on the public-policy map in ways that go well beyond one or two issue politics and in a way that includes a much greater philosophical spectrum than before. In addition, the project has generated a large cross-section of scholarship and scholars—especially in the mainstream church and liberal theological worlds—who are paying attention to families in deep and caring ways.

### **Family Ministry Centers**

In the late 1990’s and the early 2000’s, while the RCF Project was reaching full stride, another, somewhat more modest set of efforts related to families was initiated, efforts that even more directly focused upon congregations and their communities.

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<sup>19</sup> This is a summary based on chapter 11 of *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*, entitled, “Critical Familism.”

## Louisville and Baylor Centers

With support from the Lilly Endowment, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and Baylor University worked together to create The Center for Congregations and Family Ministries (Louisville) and The Center for Family and Community Ministries (Baylor). While the Louisville Center was directed by a Christian education professor, Bradley Wigger (the author of this essay), the Baylor Center was directed by a social work professor, Diana Garland, and the work of each center reflects these respective fields.

Each center created a wide array of continuing education offerings for church and community ministry leaders—conferences, workshops, family ministry training sessions, symposia, and more. Conferences such as *The Spiritual Life of Families*, *Children at Risk*, *Church-based Childcare*, or *Encountering the Holy at Home* gave pastors, church educators, social workers, lay leaders, community ministers, and parents themselves opportunities to reflect more thoroughly upon the particular role that congregations can play in their communities to strengthen and deepen family life. The conviction at work in these centers was that not only do families matter to the well-being of society and religious institutions, but that the life of faith matters to families, including the responsibility to raise children. At their best, faith and the life of faith play a constructive role in everyday family life and its challenges. As Garland and Wigger put it:

*From one generation to the next, faith and families are deeply intertwined in powerful ways. Faith puts all of life, including family life, in such a large perspective that it invites the gratitude, wonder, and hope so badly needed in the middle of the complexities and struggles of existence. On the other hand, faith becomes real only as it lives through concrete human relationships.<sup>20</sup>*

Each center also developed university and seminary courses as part of their respective graduate curricula, for example *Family Ministry* as part of Baylor’s Social Work degree, or *Christian Formation in Families* as part of the Louisville’s M.Div. degree. The primary focus at Louisville had to do with the role of home and family life in religious formation while the primary focus at Baylor was to strengthen church and community ministries that empower families. So while there was a kind of center of gravity to the work of each, there was also a tremendous amount of overlapping concern.

In addition to working together to create several of the conferences, training sessions, and symposia, there have been several other large projects upon which the centers have worked collaboratively. These include the following.

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<sup>20</sup> From the Introduction to the *Families and Faith* book series (Jossey-Bass) edited by Diana Garland and Bradley Wigger.

1) *The Church Census*.

Originally designed by Diana Garland as a research tool, it grew into a survey instrument that allows any particular congregation to understand better the nature and makeup of their constituent families. “The Church Census provides a snapshot of a congregation in terms of its strengths, challenges and stressors, faith experiences and how the congregation can help families.”<sup>21</sup> By doing so, a congregation can better determine what precisely “family ministry” looks like in their church or community.

2) *Family Ministry Journal*.

In 1997, the decade old *Journal of Family Ministry* moved its home to the Louisville Center, changed its name to *Family Ministry: Empowering through Faith*, and the two centers together led, ran, and published this quarterly resource for church and community leaders. Its purpose was to provide “a medium through which to disseminate research findings, theory development and practice models for family ministry.”<sup>22</sup> Edited at first by Garland, and later by Wigger and Dale Andrews (Boston University), the journal once again moved (in 2007) to the Baylor Center, the name was changed to *Family and Community Ministries*, and the publication is currently going strong under the editorial leadership of Jon Singletary (the current director of the Baylor Center).<sup>23</sup>

3) *Congregational Resources*.

The two centers gathered and engaged scholars around the country around two particular kinds of publishing projects. One was a series of resource review articles published in the journal addressing various topics relevant to family ministries—for example, aging, marriage enrichment programs, children, or parenting resources. These articles gathered in one place a review of some of the most helpful resources for family ministries available and were very popular among readers, and they were also made available to the public for free through the journal’s website.

In addition to the article series (and the journal itself) were several books that were intended to provide resources to congregations in relation to families. Beginning with Diana Garland’s *Family Ministry* (InterVarsity, 1999) that won the Academy of Parish Clergy’s “Book of the Year” award, Wigger and Garland began to seek authors who would be willing to write for non-academic readers, books that pastors and church educators would enjoy themselves, but could also pass along to lay members of their congregations. This commitment eventually led to the *Families and Faith Book Series*

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted from the Baylor Center’s website: [http://www.baylor.edu/social\\_work/cfcm](http://www.baylor.edu/social_work/cfcm)

<sup>22</sup> From the journal’s statement of purpose.

<sup>23</sup> Similar to the purpose of the print journal was an audio journal called *AM/FM* produced by the Centers. However, the audio journal struggled and never reached a sustainable level of subscribers.

(Jossey-Bass). Six books with Jossey-Bass were eventually produced, with three more coming from other publishers.

1. *The Power of God at Home: Nurturing Our Children in Love and Grace*. Bradley Wigger. (2003)
2. *Seasons of a Family's Life: Cultivating the Contemplative Spirit at Home*. Wendy Wright. (2003)
3. *Sacred Stories of Everyday Families: Living the Faith in Daily Life*. Diana Garland. (2003)
4. *Let the Children Come: Re-imagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective*. Bonnie Miller-McLemore. (2003)
5. *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives*. Karen Marie Yust. (2004)
6. *GirlTalk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls—and their Parents*. Joyce Mercer. (2008)
7. *Together We Pray: A Prayer Book for Families*. Bradley Wigger. (Chalice, 2005)
8. *Flawed Families of the Bible: How God's Grace Works through Imperfect Relationships*. David and Diana Garland. (Brazos, 2007)
9. *Christian Parenting Survival Guide: from A to Z*. David Thomas (Twenty-third Publications, 2007)

## Center for Ministry Development

In a vein more similar to the Baylor and Louisville Centers, than RCF, the Lilly Endowment also helped to support the Center for Ministry Development, in Naugatuck, Connecticut. CMD is an independent non-profit organization established by John Roberto in 1978. It was originally established to advise and serve Catholic dioceses in their work with youth. Over time, however, the range of concerns broadened to include inter-generational family ministries and the Center began training parish leaders to take a “family perspective” in their work, especially in the areas of education and spiritual formation. “The Center's work has a two-fold emphasis: to develop family-friendly parish communities and to nurture family faith at home.”<sup>24</sup>

As part of this approach, CMD has developed a very comprehensive program for parish and home use, not only lesson plans for catechetical processes, but training events for leaders, web-site resources, ideas and helps for seasons and celebrations of the church year, and other materials. All of it is designed to take home and family life seriously, in conjunction with church activities, for growing in and practicing the life of faith. At the heart of this program—and the component of this work receiving the most direct help from the Lilly Endowment—has been the *Generations of Faith* curriculum, intergenerational in outlook and design, geared toward the generations learning together, and over a whole lifetime.

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<sup>24</sup> From the Center's website, <http://secure.cmdnet.org>

CMD is similar to the Baylor and Louisville Centers in that it focuses particularly on congregations and parishes in the work of family ministry. It is different however, in that the *Generations of Faith* program is a particular program, well developed for a particular constituency, that is, for catholic parishes. The CMD carries out a “family perspective” in one of the most thorough and comprehensive ways in relation to religious formation and education. The Louisville and Baylor Centers, on the other hand, have been less geared to one particular constituency, or one particular program, and instead have been trying to provide resources for multiple settings and for various kinds of leadership in relation to families. And while the Baylor and Louisville Centers were also employing a family perspective, they were doing so in a slightly more general way, trying to create resources for settings where programmatic efforts were not necessarily the best use of a congregation’s limited resources, especially smaller churches and synagogues. In other words, it may not be feasible for a church of 75 members, for example, to offer a childcare center or marriage enrichment courses. It was because of such variability, in fact, that the *Church Census* was developed in the first place, to help provide congregations a way to realistically evaluate their own situations and tailor their energies appropriately.

### **Attention and Imagination**

Underneath all the work of these centers, perhaps even beneath the family perspective itself, there is a basic question at work, one that can be asked in nearly any ministry setting. That is:

*What happens when congregations pay attention to families?*

The question can be asked over and over again, and will likely generate new answers each time it is posed. Simply asking the question in congregational settings can lead to more and better attention to families and children and the ways in which the life of faith matters to them. This kind of attention often leads to a shift in the ways congregations imagine and carry out their ministries, sometimes leading to new programs designed particularly to serve the families in their midst. But just as often, paying attention to families leads to simply re-imagining the ways in which already established programs are carried out.

For example, perhaps a congregation is in a position to offer new programs such as a divorce recovery group for the community or establishing a strong marriage preparation curriculum or both. But then again, perhaps in a smaller setting, a high school Sunday school class is re-imagined to become a parent-teen class, or the youth mission trip becomes a family or intergenerational affair. Such approaches can consolidate congregational efforts while simultaneously providing family members more time with each other or a chance to engage in faith practices together. In other words, there are imaginative shifts that happen when family life is attended to and cared for, in congregational life, just as in the public arena.

What follows is a summary of the kinds of shifts that Garland and Wigger noticed occurring among congregations when home and family life were given more attention, and some of these do in fact overlap strongly with the kinds of concerns and hopes raised through the RCF Project and the CMD. Taken as a whole, they suggest something of a portrait of the directions congregations can look when engaged in family ministries or adopting a family perspective in ministry.<sup>25</sup>

- 1) *Religious formation and practice in homes.*  
Rather than relying solely upon congregational experiences (Sunday school, worship, youth groups) for religious education and formation, home life enters the imagination. Families themselves, particularly parents, are understood to be crucial to their own children’s religious formation and preparing parents for this role becomes an important task for congregations. Homes become important places for practicing faith, integrating activities such as prayer, devotional reading, or sacred rituals into the patterns of everyday family life.
- 2) *Families and congregations caring together.*  
Congregations are well served by the strengths and vitality of families even while they care for those who have been hurt by or are experiencing family crisis. A family perspective often intensifies awareness of family brokenness, and both congregations and their families have many resources to help address such challenges. In addition, such concern can heighten awareness of and care for those who do not fit neatly into stereotypical understanding of families.
- 3) *Inter-generational concern.*  
A family perspective in a congregation often leads to a deeper appreciation for inter-generational activities in the life of the congregation (as CMD’s *Generations of Faith* vividly illustrates). Traditional activities such as worship and education can be restructured so that adults and children alike can participate meaningfully. In a culture increasingly segregated by ages, stages, generations, or developmental tasks, congregational gatherings may be some of the few if only opportunities for the generations to be with and learn from one another.
- 4) *Time Together.*  
Families themselves are struggling for more time together. This awareness invites congregations to reconsider their own patterns of governance and activity. Rather than equating ministry with programming, for example, a

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<sup>25</sup> These are based on several unpublished documents generated by Wigger and Garland (grant reports, center memos, addresses, etc.) but a version was published by Diana Garland in “Family Ministry: Defining Perspectives,” *Family Ministry*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Summer 2002.

congregation may actually have less programming, or at least a different type of programming for the sake of families having more time together. Instead of adding more activities, congregational leadership can become attentive to the ways in which the entire life of the Church affects or involves families.

5) *Relationships.*

Family concern can lead to an appreciation of the power of relationships generally. From families and friendships to places and attachments—all are valued more deeply and given theological significance, counterbalancing spiritualities that emphasize detachment and individual practice. Families and relationships are viewed as potentially generative sources of identity, maturity, wisdom, ethical formation, and the religious life in general.

6) *Community values.*

Just as family relationships demand commitment, service, cooperation, tolerance, and stability to do well; such values are seen as crucial to society also. A family perspective in ministry helps provides a check upon a general cultural emphasis upon choice, consumption, hyper-autonomy, and developmental segregation—all plaguing congregations as well.

7) *Larger vision.*

As congregations pay attention to families, vision expands beyond the walls of the church. To attend to families has the effect of focusing concern upon such realms as households, neighborhoods, public life, and the culture itself. Rather than narrowing vision, attention to families can actually intensify concern for the larger societal context of families, especially as the society affects children and youth.

The last points circle right back into the kinds of concerns that the RCF Project focused upon. While the RCF more or less began with large public policy concerns and the role of churches and religious scholarship in shaping such policy-making, the Louisville and Baylor Centers, as well as the CMD, began with a focus upon local congregations and their communities, and especially the families that compose them. These are matters of emphasis; both sets of work are concerned with both realms. Of great significance is the fact that all involved in this work share a deep and abiding commitment to families as a source of personal, public, and religious well-being.

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While the RCF Project and the Louisville Center have formally ended, the work the CMD continues to thrive under the leadership of John Roberto, as does the Baylor Center as part the School of Social Work of Baylor University where Diana Garland is currently the Dean. The Baylor Center continues and extends much of the work begun together with Louisville. And much of the work of the RCF, especially in the realm of

publication, has been taken up by Emory University’s Center for the Study of Law and Religion, where new books and research continue to be generated.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusions

Personal concern. Public concern. Ultimate concern. Precisely why these idiosyncratic, fragile, messy, hard to define relationships can be so intertwined with so many realms of concern is not easy to explain and suggests that the meaning of family rests somewhere deep in our humanity. But all of this work and devotion of resources by so many people in so many ways does imply, at the least, families matter—our families, other families, all families. The ways families matter, in the end, are likely to be as complex, heart-felt, painful, beautiful, and knotty as families themselves. What is true for us as individuals is true for us as a public: families matter more than we can say.

“People are mysteries,” writes Craig Dykstra, Vice President of Lilly’s Religion Division. And what he says of “people” is certainly true of “families” as well. Mysteries, in this theological vision of things, are not simply problems that go away once we figure them out; instead, mysteries are irreducible, enduring realities “that we know only through a glass darkly and never exhaustively.”<sup>27</sup> Such a notion is a helpful reminder that not only does a family perspective affect the ways a society orders public life. Not only does attending to families affect the ways in which congregations practice ministry. In addition, we are reminded that a theological perspective also affects the way we see families. In such a view, families are not exhausted by the categories we use to describe them (e.g., healthy or dysfunctional, divorced or intact) or by the roles they play (e.g. nurturing children, providing income, or stabilizing communities). Though these certainly matter, there is always more to them. Families are more than problems to be fixed, more than resources to be tapped, more than objects of ministry. To see families in light of mystery is to recognize their deeply human condition—simultaneously characterized by sin and redemption, blessing and curse, grandeur and misery. To see families in this way is to see them, if not life together, as rooted in God’s irreducible image, deep realities we can never know fully, but through whom we can know love.

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<sup>26</sup> For the Emory Center, the subject of family is one among many areas of concern. See their website: <http://www.law.emory.edu/index.php?id=1996>

<sup>27</sup> Craig Dykstra, *Vision and Character: A Christian Educator’s Alternative to Kohlberg*, (New York: Paulist, 1981), pp. 34-37.

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