



The Absent Father

By David Cook

In 1978 Ronald Conway published his expose of Australian life, *The Land of the Long Weekend*. Conway asserts that Australia is one of the most female-dominated societies in the world, and ruled by what he calls the 'Magna Marta syndrome'. According to this syndrome, the husband roams on the family rim, something like his wife's eldest son.

Many criticised Conway for this harsh judgment. However, the absence of a father figure in the home has been highlighted by recent studies of indigenous culture in Australia. On a visit to the UK a few years back I heard a BBC interview with a conservative sociologist who said he believed that we would witness the disintegration of family life in the UK in our lifetime. Apparently, the average 16 year old no longer lives with both birth parents. Usually the adolescent is being raised by a mother alone, or birth mother and step father.

As we emerge from the annual celebration of Fathers' Day, it is a good time to ask about the health and integrity of the father's place in the family. Fathers have not vanished off the earth, so where are they?

Here is some anecdotal evidence: some will tell you that fathers have moved on to 'greener pastures': some found the unrelenting pressure to perform too demanding; some will admit they have made profound mistakes; some will admit they have never grown up and feel like emotionally insecure adolescents in an adult body; Many will blame outside factors such as the cut throat pressure of the business world or vigorous feminism or Government policy in some States which seems deliberately determined to usurp the role of parents in a child's life.

Whatever the reason, what can be done for the sake of all

concerned? Here are three suggestions:

Men need meaningful male mentors. There is nothing new about the vital need of one-to-one discipleship in the church. What an asset it is for men under pressure to have an older mentor who has, 'been there, done that', to encourage younger men who are still in the thick of battle. Time and frequency of meeting should be left to the couple, but reading a book together or having a Bible study and praying for one another is vital. Mentors to preachers develop a plan of action, and a similar such plan for a man's leadership and godliness could be helpful. Two books I have found helpful are, *Love and Respect*, by Emerson Eggerichs and *Taking God Seriously* by J I Packer.

Churches ought to promote programmes which affirm whole family activities. Of course there is a place for gender and age specific activities but the church needs to beware of always dividing families. Think how your church provides whole family activities. Are your church services overtly age filleted? At the very least, why not look at the fifth Sunday services in the year and make them whole family services? Truth finds its own level and such a service will be a tonic for older church members as well. A Saturday night BBQ event for the whole family with games and quiz activities can be building for all ages.

Churches need to be sure they are resourcing men for the challenge of leadership. It is not enough to preach the need of leadership and devotional direction in the family; the church needs to resource it too. Providing family devotional material on the current sermon series can be one way of doing this. Adopting spiritual grandparents within the congregation for baby-sitting services can be a great experience for all involved. Are single parent families readily catered for in this adoptive

structure? Pastors, are you consciously thinking how to resource your men to live the godly lives you are exhorting them to live from the pulpit?

In 1976 we went to our first parish, Wee Waa, then the cotton centre of Australia. Most people in the town had moved there from all over the world, particularly the USA. This meant that wide family structures of grandparents, uncles, aunties, cousins was rare. So the church made up for it. Christmas Day was celebrated together. Family nights took place regularly in the

church hall. Spiritual grandparents were readily adopted.

Today the church must be in the vanguard of the promotion of healthy family life in the face of the vacuous destructive forces of secularisation. Is your church family friendly?

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