

## Issues Confronting the Modern Family

Those born in or before the 1940's have witnessed enormous change. It could never all be summarised. Penicillin began to be used towards the end of the decade, but in the 40's there were no frozen or take away foods as we know them today, there were no television, photocopiers, petrol lawn mowers, plastic contact lenses, disposable nappies, pacemakers or 'the pill'. The 1940's was before pantyhose, clothes dryers, electric blankets, air-conditioners, and drip-dry clothes. There was no "the third world" (there wasn't even a second world) and no one had walked on the moon.

In the 40's, nearly everyone married first and then lived together! Closets were for clothes, not for 'coming out' of. People who were 'gay', were happy! 'Fast food' was what Catholics ate during Lent. House husbands hadn't been heard of, nor had gay rights, dual careers and computers.

This was a time before day-care centres, group therapy and nursing homes. People had not heard of FM radio, Cassette or CD players, electronic type-writers, word-processors, artificial hearts, yoghurt and men wearing earrings. 'Time sharing' meant togetherness, not computers or apartments!

A chip meant a piece of wood. Hardware meant hard-ware and software wasn't even a word! Pizza, McDonalds and latte coffees were unheard of. 'Grass' was mowed, 'coke' was a cold drink, 'pot' was something you cooked in and ice was frozen water and AIDS were helpers,

The cost of motor vehicles was equivalent to 94 weeks of the average wage. Petrol was rationed and Holdens were first produced in 1948. Rock music was Grandma's lullaby 'Sex change', well that would have been interesting! There were No ipods, DVD's Cassette tapes or transistor radios and the idea of a Play Station would have caused great confusion.

People of that era made do with what they had! Many new couples could not afford to live separately from relatives and if they paid a deposit on a home they could only afford to add furnishings gradually. They were last generation that was so stupid as to think you needed a husband to have a baby!

People generally kept their feelings and their secrets to themselves. Loyalty was considered a high virtue. This proved to be both a benefit and a sadness. Life was tough, but they survived!

Life is very different sixty years later. The marriage rate in New Zealand is at an all-time low, and falling. This is driving the birth-rate down. Views of marriage and family have changed: same sex couples, unmarried parents, single parents and blended families are all part of the 'landscape' today. Starting a family has changed from being an expression of faith in the future, to a test of the relationship

The high rate of divorce means that 20% of dependent children live with only one of their natural parents. Older generations would like to see more emphasis on loyalty, but

company, sporting and family loyalty are disappearing. Younger Kiwis are hoping to find a relationship that 'works'. The ratio of 'married' to never-married is approaching 50/50, and partners are becoming as common as 'spouses'. More people are choosing to live on their own and freedom and flexibility are becoming the new virtues.

The average age of divorce is 40 for men and 37 for women, while 11% are aged under 30. Average length of a marriage that ends in divorce, is 7 years. Marriages conducted by ministers of religion have declined from 89% (1967) to 68% (1977) to 50% (2007). How did we get to this?

It is interesting to look at the life of the last three generations. **The children of the Depression** went through the hardships the depression brought as well as World War II. They were establishing families when Australia was entering a golden age of prosperity and marriage represented the hope for a bright and prosperous future. They registered the highest marriage rate and birth rate (1952-1953). For them, marriage was not primarily about quality of relationship, rather, marriage was seen primarily as an institution for raising children and maintaining a secure family, which helped society be stable.

*"We never talked about relationships. We just got married and got on with it. You had your happy times - especially with the children - but you had your difficult times, as well, and you knew everyone else did, too."*

*"I suppose I never really thought about whether I'd get married or not. You just did. Everybody did. It was the done thing, and you felt sorry for people who couldn't find a husband or a wife."*

*"Once the children came along, you knew where your duties lay."*

These comments were typical. Conversation and behaviour was 'polite' and many topics were never discussed. Children were supposed to 'be seen but not heard'. Many ex-war veterans never spoke of their experiences and they lived with many tragic and painful memories. They, nor their relatives understood post-traumatic shock disorder. Families kept secrets and put on a good 'front'. Divorcees were shunned. Men married pregnant girls rather than face family shame. People married young and the average length of a marriage before one partner died, was 30 years .

The **Baby Boomers** spent their formative years were in a world of contradiction. There was unknown economic growth and development, yet there was the Cold War, the space race and threat of a nuclear holocaust. The 'Eichman' trial in 1961 gave new meaning to authority and responsibility. This forever changed people's sense of blindly accepting the authority of elders and others in authority roles. Rebellion and challenge was symbolised by the musical 'Hair' and new hairstyles and fashions such as the mini and maxi skirt emerged among young people, as they copied the new pop stars. Mass media provided a forum for universal ideas to gain momentum and the anti-Vietnam war protests and 'flower power' forged a

new opportunity for youth to express a new freedom. The contraceptive pill gave women a new freedom of control over birth that no women had ever had before.

The Baby Boomers embraced instant experimentation as a way of life. Life might be short as there was no guarantee of a future - so the catchcry to enjoy the present moment and live it to the full. Modern forms of communication, music and art, allowed these values to become widespread. As the Baby Boomers moved into their middle years, something unexpected happened. Social threats did not eventuate and vast medical improvements began to add to their span of life. They were still around!

They found themselves on the leading edge of social change. They were the first generation to fully embrace Feminism and a new emphasis on relationships emerged that redefined marriage. Marriage became to be seen primarily about the relationship between a man and a woman and no longer just about children, families or stability. Communication of feelings became important and public admission of 'who I am' began to become common as did the awareness that there were many minority groups who lived in quite different ways and who wanted their choices validated. Therapists, and counsellors suddenly found they had no end of work!

Things were supposed to 'feel good', and this was captured in the Neil Diamond song, "Don't think, feel". In this climate, when one spouse said to the other, "This isn't working for me this often became the death knell for their marriage. People began to see there were other choices that were possible for them. People generally became more aware of sham marriages among celebrities and other well known people. Sometimes this reflected their own experience or that of their parents generation. Social change led to financial benefits being provided to women when couples separated, making this choice financially possible for the first time.

Increased interaction with others meant men, and especially women, were meeting new people more often, providing them with more opportunities to meet 'attractive alternatives' to their spouse. As a result more and more people chose to leave a marriage that was not satisfying or that intolerable. This attitude they bequeathed to their children.

**Those born since 1970** lived their formative years in a sense of being disconnected. They were the children of their parent's age of anxiety and searching. Much of their experienced has been outpaced by the next generation. Many of them children grew up with separated parents or had friends who were in this situation. They have known divorce and blended families as 'normal' and Solo parents are part of the landscape. Working mums were normal for them. They experienced massive and rapid change so they are were not alarmed by dramatic social and cultural changes. They belonged to small families. Many now are part of blended families.

'Being gay' and the reality of AIDS is part of their reality. They have schoolmates of different cultures and religious outlooks, so 'different' is normal! New technology, once in their hands, is already superseded so they don't expect things to last. Access to

drugs, especially alcohol, is easy, and experimentation is a pressure. They have access to money and have a large amount of disposable income. They are part of a high teenage suicide culture (especially among boys)

They are the most highly educated and most highly stimulated generation that have ever lived. Being the offspring of divorced parents has shaped different attitudes among them to marriage. They enter de facto relationships before or instead of marriage. Until the past 5 years if they have married or had children it is when they are older. There is a trend, yet to be confirmed as a permanent change that sees those born from the mid-80's marrying younger and having children earlier. Perhaps they are no longer reacting to the failure of their parents' marriages. They hope their marriage will last for life but they know there are options and 10 years is a good achievement! As for their parents, marriage demands a good relationship and relationships can deteriorate or break down. They believe marriage is not worth enduring if the relationship is not working.

Choice is a part of their experience, in everything and for them, 'mix and match' is preferable to any presented package, whether it be material, cultural or religious. They keep their options open and postpone commitment. Marriage is for 'when we are ready.' They have only one or two children (or none) on average - and may in fact not marry. Marriage remains part their ideal. They know the current state of marriage falls short of their ideal, but they don't know what to do about it. Today 27% of babies are born to unmarried parents  
And 60% of first marriages end in divorce.

We live in a time of great social change where choices don't feel like choices. Choice has often become a pressure to keep up with the choices others are making! These choices are never out of view because of mass media bombardment. The different world around us makes difference the norm! Movies, art, music, literature and the media celebrities offer a new set of values, often without boundaries. Parental or Christian values are often contradicted by these powerful mediums and parents can feel powerless to combat them

Only 40% of pre-schoolers are cared for at home by a parent. The majority are cared for by relatives or by a child-care agency. Some begin at one month old!  
Usually, both parents work and Grandparents are shouldering many of the tasks. Kids are usually involved in multiple activities (sport, ballet, music, drama etc.)  
Meeting the costs for this creates more pressure and limits the time people have to have fun, to relax and to be with family or friends. Are we too busy? Isn't this what everyone says? Are parents robbing themselves of parenthood? Are parents robbing children of childhood?

Teaching children to juggle their time at such a young age can cause high anxiety, depression and other mental disorders? It is not safe as it once was, to let children play without supervision, so outdoor fun and games are reduced. Some children's sense of fun is reduced to solitary computer games. Children are learning that parenting is more about organization and administration than about playing, cuddling and listening?

With teenagers working or being engaged in multiple activities and parents working long and different hours to one another, many families no longer share a family meal. In traditional societies this was the primary time of family interaction. Now many parents and grandparents substitute quality 'fun and games' time for DVD's because it is easier? Some children have no siblings to play with so there is no fun – only solitary games.

Some adults stop playing because they have no time, and laughter disappears from their lives. What can we do, as families, as parents, as Grandparents, as Passionist Family Groups?

Children need to play. In their playing they 'slow down' their adult relatives and provide a balance of work and play, so encouraging children to play can benefit adults. It is worth asking, 'are you too busy to play?' Is your PFG too busy organising activities or is too inactive, so there is no play, no meaningful sharing, no modelling of a true family spirit? Do your meals together allow opportunities for people to share?

Where and how you eat can affect that! For example, eating in restaurants provides little interaction and little privacy for open conversation. Nor does it fit in to our 'low cost/no cost philosophy'. Those who cannot afford such meals will usually provide a false excuse for being unable to attend.

Some of the people born before the 50's, still think a meal is about eating. It is also about sharing conversation. Where we sit at the table and with whom, is important. At a Family Group outing or in a restaurant, why sit next to your spouse? Spouses can discuss things together any time. Why not mix and spend time with those you don't know? Doing this requires taking initiative, or it requires some prompting from those in leadership.

PFG's can provide people with a sense of family. We strive to represent Jesus' values of welcome, belonging and inclusion. We can provide something that many people in our modern world have lost or never had - a family to belong to!

We have lived through much change and we see the challenges facing young families today.

This prompts some questions.

1. How can your PFG be a sign of hope and that 'we' believe in 'Family'?
2. What do you need to do to ensure there is a sense of sharing in your PFG, so members know one another better?
3. What do you need to do to ensure there is a sense of 'play' and a break from the mentality that "we're too busy"?

4. How can we include those without family?

5. Who are you going to sit opposite next time you have a meal together?

Exercise

Below are three different tables. **Table 1** is **rectangular**, **Table 2** is **circular** and **Table 3** is **square**

Presume all seats will be taken. Pick a space at each table and place yourself there. Then identify who, sitting at that table with you, would be likely to be able to have the best conversation with you? Who would you probably have the poorest conversation with?

If the table was twice the size (and had twice the number of seats?) what difference would this make?

