

A Church for All People

By Janet Parker

Have you heard of “Unmarried America?”^[1] The 2000 U.S. Census shows that the number of households composed of single adults now surpasses the number of married households in the U.S. Furthermore, the number of households with unmarried partners has jumped by 72% since 1990.^[2] More people than ever before are now either single or choosing to live in committed relationships without getting married. Additionally, more gay and lesbian people are living openly together as couples and building families of their own. Ironically, while more straight couples are choosing to forgo the bonds of marriage, many gay and lesbian couples would welcome the opportunity to legally wed if they could. Clearly, the face of the American family is changing. These “facts on the ground” conflict with our dominant cultural picture of the American family. Most people still visualize a heterosexual, married, middle-class couple with children as the ideal, even if that norm doesn’t reflect their own families.

Some people are so wedded to this version of family that they are desperately trying to recreate a “Leave It to Beaver” America. “Abstinence-only” programs are gaining popularity in high schools, replacing more robust and effective sexual education programs. Politicians are inserting “marriage promotion” programs into welfare laws. And many states have passed constitutional amendments limiting marriage to opposite-sex couples. Christians have taken the lead in all of these efforts. All of this begs the question: will the people in our pews reflect the diversity of family structures in our society, or will churches increasingly look like museum pieces from a bygone era? It’s not only gay families that often feel unwelcome in the church. Interracial couples, immigrant families, low-income families, and single people often find that churches hold them at arms length.

Many churches are barreling through the cultural shifts in American society with blinders on, refusing to recognize the changes or actively opposing new understandings of family. The United Church of Christ, however, is reaching out to embrace people of all backgrounds, regardless of their family structure. As evidenced by the Stillspeaking ad campaign and the General Synod resolution to support same-sex marriage, the UCC is extending an extravagant welcome to those who have been disenfranchised by the church.

But many assert that the Bible only provides one model of family—the married, heterosexual, nuclear family. When you read beyond Genesis 2, however, you quickly discover that the families of the Bible are even more diverse than those of our own era. If we want our families to be biblical, which biblical family do we have in mind? Adam and Eve, or Abraham, his wife Sarah and his concubine Hagar? Or Jacob and his two wives Leah and Rachel? How about King Solomon and his seven hundred wives? Or Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi who supported each other as family after the loss of Ruth’s husband? ^[3] Or shall we emulate the apostle Paul, who advised Christians that it is better to remain unmarried? ^{1 Cor 7:7-9} It seems that imposing a false uniformity on the biblical text in support of a narrow definition of the family is disingenuous at best.

[1] There is now an advocacy organization called “Unmarried America” which is “an information service for the new unmarried majority.” See www.unmarriedamerica.org

[2] Steve Bodzin, “Home Alone: Households of Singles Go To First in U.S.,” in the *Los Angeles Times* (18 August 2005), sec. A. 12.

[3] References to these biblical families are found in Genesis, chapters 2, 16 and 29, 1 Kings 11, and the book of Ruth.

The Scriptures, however, do not leave us without guidance as we navigate uncharted waters in American culture. Without giving easy answers, the Bible offers clues that can enable a faithful response to our changing cultural norms surrounding family. Few Christians realize the extent to which Jesus and the early disciples redefined the meaning of family. Jesus himself, when told that his mother and his siblings were looking for him, responded that henceforth, his family would be defined not by blood relations but by faithfulness to God: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” Jesus asked. Looking at the disciples gathered around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” Mark 3:33-35

If faithfulness to God marks one as belonging to Jesus’ family, fidelity between human beings is a distinguishing characteristic of a human family. Even where ties of blood or legal marriage are not present, discerning Christians will recognize family when they see covenant faithfulness demonstrated between people who love one another. As William Sloane Coffin once preached in relation to homosexuality, “the law of love” carries greater weight in the church than “the laws of biology.” [\[2\]](#)

Following this trajectory of inclusion modeled by Jesus, the first Christians soon burst the bounds of the traditional proscriptions regarding membership in the church. Beginning as a movement within Judaism, the early disciples were prodded by the Spirit of God into reaching out to the Gentiles. While initially resistant, Peter receives a vision from God which taught him not to call anyone impure or unclean. Witnessing the faith of Cornelius and his associates, Peter asks, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” Acts 10:47

What was good news for the early church is still good news for us today. One message is clear: Jesus didn’t reject people. Neither should we.

[2] William Sloane Coffin, Jr., “The Fundamental Injunction: Love One Another, *Sermons from Riverside* (May 12, 1985), 1-3, as cited by James F. Kay in “Homosexuality—What Then Shall We Preachers Say?” in *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, ed. Choon-Leong Seow (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 103.

Questions for Thought, Discussion, and Action

1. Do you believe that the Bible provides only one model for the Christian family? If so, on what do you base this belief? If not, how do you believe the Scriptures can provide guidance to Christians today as definitions of family change?
2. What can churches do to actively welcome non-traditional families and singles, while still meeting the needs of more traditional families? How might youth and family ministries and Christian education programs need to change to better support single-parent families or gay and lesbian families or low-income families?
3. Read the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10. In Peter's time, the Gentiles were considered unclean because they didn't follow Jewish laws, especially regarding diet and circumcision. What categories of people are considered unclean or impure in our society? What, if anything, might create concern or cause resistance in your church if you were to reach out to these groups of people?



Rev. Dr. Janet Parker is Associate Pastor for Parish Life at Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ in Arlington, VA. Dr. Parker is a pastor, teacher, scholar, and ethicist. She has pastored several Presbyterian churches, coordinated disaster relief in NYC after 9/11, taught Christian ethics at Chicago Theological Seminary, and serves on a World Council of Churches theological advisory team.