


# Editorial

Andy Brubacher Kaethler

While completing a master's degree at Toronto School of Theology in the 1990s, I attended classes at numerous denominational colleges. On one occasion I sat beside a young priest from Angola at a Catholic college. Making small talk before the class started, I mindlessly asked, "How big is your family?" I noticed the puzzled look on his face and was immediately embarrassed by the obvious faux pas I had just committed. Priests do not marry. What an insensitive question.

I apologized for my transgression, but the priest quickly clarified that his puzzlement was not that I thought he was married and had children. As an Angolan man, he had so many siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles—not

 **The priest's confusion reminds us that we do not use the term *family* consistently between societies.**

to mention ancestors who had died long ago—that he had no idea how to count them all.

My assumptions about what *family* means were clearly different from his.

The priest's confusion reminds us that we do not use the term *family* consistently between societies. But the term

is also used to connote different configurations of family relationships *within* a society, and these understandings are not static over time.

## The myth of family

In the West in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the normative assumption has been that a family consists of a man and a woman who are married to each other for life and who procreate to have one or more children. This understanding of what constitutes a family has shaped government policy, social services, church activities, education—virtually every aspect of life.

The height of the traditional family was in the decades following World War II. There was relative peace and prosperity in the West, and social institutions proliferated. The family unit was at the center of social stability and economic growth. The television show *Leave it to Beaver* (1957–1963) reflected and promoted the stereotype of the modern, suburban family as the center and ideal of Western society.

This notion of the traditional family is a myth. It was a myth before the twentieth century. It was a myth during the twentieth century. It is a myth today.

The term *myth* here does not mean make-believe or untrue. A myth is a narrative that serves a social organizational purpose. Myths are not in themselves negative. But myths are harmful when they become dominant narratives that exclude other possibilities. The myth of the traditional family is harmful when it denigrates or excludes family configurations that do not conform to heteronormative, life-long, monogamous, procreative marriage unions.

Family is at the center of political debate and acrimony. Religious and political conservatives tend to express concern that there is an assault on the traditional family. Those



**Many political debates are fought on the battleground of the family.**

to the right fear progressive values and permissive practices weaken individual well being and the social structure necessary for stable political and religious institutions. Religious and political progressives are concerned that laws and practices that narrowly define family as a man and a woman and their binary children perpetuate patriarchal violence and curtail individual freedom in the expression of sexuality, gender, and love. Many political debates are fought on the battleground of the family.

### **Family in the Bible and church**

The Bible itself provides surprisingly few examples of healthy, enduring families—at least, families that fit the modern Western myth. Dysfunction among families is frequent in Scripture. There are plenty of polygamous and polyamorous relationships. In the Bible, God works *in* families, *through* families, and regularly, *in spite of* families.

Nevertheless, family remains a central feature to individual identity, social organization, culture, and religious life. We invest considerable amounts of time, emotional energy, and finances into family and family relationships. And, as central as family is to individuals, societies, and the church, it is difficult to find a common, enduring definition of *family*. Perhaps that is a good thing.

The church has played a role in fostering positive, enduring understandings of family. It has also played a role in perpetuating ethically harmful and theologically unsound understandings. Two motivating questions

this issue of *Vision* asks are: (1) How can the church play a positive role in supporting families without relying on a narrow understanding of the ideal family unit itself? (2) What definition of *family* needs to replace the antiquated and probably-never-accurate conceptions of the traditional, nuclear family?

### **In this issue**

Following these questions, the first three essays acknowledge and embrace the widening possibilities for family configurations in the first half of the twenty-first century. Erica Lea-Simka provides an inspired reflection on how Queer families are holy families, embodying the fullness of radical belonging. Alicia Maldonado-Zahra probes the challenges and joys of a Puerto Rican-American and Iraqi-Palestinian intercultural marriage. Emily North shares her experience of how a Mennonite-Jewish interfaith marriage can deepen and strengthen the connection of each to their faiths.

The next two pieces deal with biblical and theological considerations for founding a healthy, faithful understanding of the family. Micah Peters Unrau offers provoking insights into Jesus's use of family imagery to foster discipleship. Ben Woodward-Breckbill explores non-patriarchal ways of understanding the text of the Lord's Prayer.

The essay by Joe Kotva offers considerations of recent developments in Assistive Reproductive Technologies (ART), which bring hope and joy for women experiencing involuntary childlessness along with a myriad of moral questions.

A poem by Canadian poet D. S. Martin kindles awareness of the human yearning for relational wholeness, likening the journey of the poet toward wholeness to the child in utero seeking birth and to other evocative images.

Two essays by Canadian authors address relationships between adults and their parents. Susan Fish shares humorous reflections on her relationship with her mother, while Arthur Boers grapples with his family's history of abuse.

Continuing to address family dysfunction, Cathrin van Sintern-Dick offers insights as a family mediator into how parents in conflict can provide a stable environment for their children to grow.

One congregational prayer is included: Ruth Boehm's prayer for women and moms on Mother's Day.

We conclude this issue with two selections reprinted from the recent Institute of Mennonite Studies publication *Resistance: Confronting*

*Violence, Power, and Abuse in Peace Churches* (2022). Lydia Neufeld Harder and Ingrid Bettina Wolfear together process their experience of adoption during the “Sixties Scoop” and coming to terms with it later in life. Steph Chandler Burns reflects through poetry about how the image of God as a grandmother is healing for her as a Queer Mennonite.

Each contribution to this issue addresses the changing, broadening understanding of family, prompting the church to continue to foster loving, caring, and stable relationships.

### **About the author**

Andy Brubacher Kaethler is a pastor and teacher, recently relocated from Elkhart, Indiana, to Ottawa, Ontario. Andy spent twenty years at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) as a professor of Christian Formation and Culture, director of !Explore: A Theological Program for High School Youth, and co-editor of *Vision*. He recently returned to pastoral ministry at Ottawa Mennonite Church. His understanding of family deepened and broadened while raising a family with his wife and through many meaningful interactions with families of many configurations at AMBS, Belmont Mennonite Church, and beyond.