

Families Create Action Support Networks

Family Power: Social Change Project

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A visit to Australia (February 12-16, 1979) by Dr. Masamba ma Mpolo, Secretary of the Office of Family Education, World Council of Churches, Geneva, has stimulated great interest in the Family Power: Social Change project, which is part of the family ministries programme of the World Council of Churches.



Family Initiative

The project is rooted in insights I find exciting — the belief that families need not just succumb to external pressures and become victims of outside forces; they need not wait for commercial interests, television and radio, newspapers and magazines, films and advertisements, patronizing and matronizing social service bodies to tell them what to do, what to think, what to buy, what value systems to uphold, what goals for living to accept. They can become more self-reliant, more liberated, less other directed, be makers of history. Fatalistic, hand-wringing despair can be replaced by courageous grappling with issues, in a spirit of hope. In line with the Old Testament prophets, families can both denounce evil elements involving injustice and manipulation, and can announce new possibilities for a more truly human society (see Paulo Freire, **Cultural Action for Freedom**, Penguin).

A single family can exercise great influence, but more effective work can often be done in co-operation with other families which are also committed to common value systems and/or specific goals and want to bring about change.

So the Family Power: Social Change project envisages that two, three, four, five or more families form themselves into clusters to act and reflect on issues of their own choosing. They can live separately and meet regularly, or develop varying degrees of closer relationships. There is room for variety.



Conserving and Transforming

All too often the family is looked on as an institution which supports the status quo, upholds conservative, backward-looking attitudes, which are welcomed by powerful exploitive groups. Family life certainly includes the conservation of traditional values, but in addition it can and should be a source of transformation of social life, both for the family and the community. If we don't conserve, it is difficult to transform, and transforming without a strong degree of conservation can be destructive and disintegrating.

By grouping together each unit can be helped to preserve many traditional family values, such as the provision of a place of belonging where people have "territorial rights"; a "community of intimacy" where there is a legitimate claim on warmth, affection, love, shared concerns, throughout life; a basic unit of society of manageable size for shared support for dialogue and awakening; a place where children can be loved into growing and creativity; a place which provided roots, a name.

Families in clusters can also release untapped power, realise dreams, solve problems, find new ways of living together, create new support networks.

There is, of course, the danger of exclusiveness in single families and clusters of families. Group identity and creativity indeed demand a strong loyalty, but with children of families in a cluster, this may cause tensions when friendships are strong with those not members of a cluster — sensitivity in this area is required.

The Family Power: Social Change project is pro nuclear family, but sees the nuclear family as needing personal support systems, especially in rather de-personalized urban environments. The average number of children per family in Australia is 2.4. With such small family units, mainly living in cities (85% of Australia's population) wider relationships are all the more necessary and significant — for children as well as adults.



Action — Reflection

An action-reflection method is recommended by the Family Power: Social Change project for families working together. Such a method has much to recommend it, and is full of possibilities for bringing about needed social change by family clusters co-operating together.

They identify specific problems, concerns, hopes, asking: "What can be done about this situation?" Keeping in mind facts, feelings, values, they may analyse various action possibilities, decide on action steps, reflect on the results, make adjustments as the result of reflection (which includes evaluation).

De-professionalising

"De-professionalising" is an aspect of Family Power: Social Change. There are clear signs in Australia of growing dependence on specialists. This is the pertinent valid point made again and again by Ivan Illich in such books as "De-schooling Society" and "Medical Nemesis". Families singly, but especially in clusters, can work out solutions to problems without being dependent on experts. Certainly professionals can make a contribution, but in many areas of life they should not be allowed to take over, to dominate, domesticate, and marginalise (to use terms common in the writings of Paulo Freire).

Is all this just theoretical, abstract talk, detached from reality?

It is happening

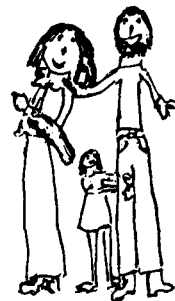
Reports from people who have formed clusters of families in various countries around the world, indicate that there is a practical, identifiable response. Masamba ma Mpolo told us stories from many countries of the exercise of family power for social change — Africa, the Philippines, East Germany, Scotland — and on and on. What of Australia?

I was surprised, during Dr. Masamba's visit, to hear about twenty-one clusters of families in Victoria (most not linked with the Family Power: Social Change project) of which I did not know previously. We visited some clusters and heard their stories.

One group of parents had banded together to form a "Learning Co-operative". These parents make a commitment to share in the actual teaching in the school they have created.

Another group has purchased properties and pulled down back fences. It has formed a community co-operative which aims to provide accommodation and communal facilities for members or other persons, to establish an extended family network in conjunction with adjoining households, to share material resources and skills, to contribute to the growth and development of the people involved, to develop an alternative structure of community living in an urban environment.

Families in a third area had banded together for regular worship and action, with strong emphasis on the full participation of children and single people, as well as parents. Many other Australian examples support the basic insights of the Family Power: Social Change project.



It is of crucial importance that such groups of families be formed by local initiative, that the issues belong to the group, and that action be undertaken as well as discussion. Much initiative has been taken by churches. There are also clusters where no specific religious profession is made. For Christian and other religious groups worship, Bible study, theological reflection, is an essential part of the life of the cluster. The local church itself should be more and more an extended family.



Privacy and Community

In most clusters the basic "nuclear" family unit remains intact, maintaining privacy in its own house or flat, but it finds support in the cluster which joins the member families in groups. The clusters may be of different sizes, and involve varying degrees of commitment of time and possessions.

The tension between needs for privacy (one small girl living in a commune exclaimed with feeling, "I only want one Mummy") and for wider supportive networks should be recognized and accepted.

There are complementary values in both privacy and wider relationships, as Australian families which have created clusters have found. Dr Masamba referred to "re-tribalising" isolated family units by linking identifiable, committed nuclear families in a wider social allegiance.

We need a new spirit in our Australian cities, country towns, in rural areas. The need is particularly urgent in our great cities where isolation, loneliness, grief and even despair are greatest. We need new life which calls for faith, justice, love. The Family Power: Social Change movement can be an expression of this needed new spirit, of immense significance to children, deserving clear focus in the International year of the Child.



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