

How can the church prevent the breakdown of the fragmenting Cambodian family?

What is a Family?

The Cambodian family is very different from the typical Western conservative Protestant view. This view has regarded the 'nuclear' family, typically with three or four members, as the traditional model of the family but this view owes more to European culture than to the Bible, and is far from what is 'normal' in most cultures, including Cambodia.

In Bible times Hebrew families were grouped together in houses. An interdependent Hebrew household was made up of between 50 and 100 people. These were in turn united through marriage and kinship and adoption to form clans. Several clans constituted a tribe and the confederation of tribes made up Israel. According to this model the family was not just a social unit, but also an economic and political one. Marriages were arranged and a 'bride price' was paid to seal the covenant (Genesis 34:1, I Samuel 18:25, Leviticus 27). Whole households, including children, worked together on the land. It is a pattern, which has much in common with the extended families found today in traditional rural areas of Cambodia.

In this context marriage is usually arranged, and a covenant not just between individuals, but also between families. Where parents are loving, and concerned with the welfare of their children, then arranged marriages can be a successful union of dynasties. They are also a strong reminder that two families are being brought together and not just two individuals. This can strengthen the bonds with the community, and economic ties further reinforce the relationship.

What causes family breakdown in Cambodia?

Problems may arise with this model of marriage and family life, if parents of the bride and groom take decisions for the children without any regard for their opinions or needs, perhaps choosing a partner on purely financial grounds. Another unhealthy model in Cambodia is the dominant patriarchal marriage in which men become abusive towards their wives and children, and rarely if ever consult them in decisions that affect them. Domestic violence has been found to be common in Cambodia.

Political ideologies, too, sometimes wage war against the family unit. For example, during the Pol Pot era, the family rice pot was broken as a symbol that the new regime would do away with the need for the family. Everything was supposed to have been provided by the Angkor (the new regime) who even arranged marriages. Children were expected to speak out against their parents if they were going 'against the Angkor' and many children were the soldiers who enforced the rules, which went against the traditions of the elders being respected.

Cambodian culture still contains many fatalistic attitudes. Men still blame their wives if the family are poor and feel that this can justify their desertion.

In a society where people's belief structures; Buddhism, Animism and Communism have been challenged and left a vacuum, people may turn to materialism as the answer. Money becomes a god. "If only I had enough money everything would be OK" they think. So in some 'middle-class' families parents both work long and late and see very little of their families or each other and relationships become frail and breakdown.

What is God's concern for families in Cambodian society?

What would God have us promote or discourage, protect or challenge in the area of family life? Scripture does not present a particularly rosy picture of the family. There is fratricide, rape, incest, adultery and murder, as well as love and loyalty both within households and beyond them.

Nevertheless, the 'family' can be a relationship and an institution where God's grace is experienced and where people can find nurture and healing. It is a place where they can grow as persons in their individuality, in their social relations, and in their relationship with God¹. However, like any special relationship and 'institution', 'the family' can become perverted by sin, with people being disloyal, competing for power and neglecting responsibilities. Sadly, some churches have at times misinterpreted Scripture in an attempt to justify such wrong behaviour.

As mentioned earlier, the Old Testament gives us the model of the extended family. This was not just a social but also an economic and political unit. In the New Testament we see marriage as a covenantal relationship, characterised by mutual submission, respect and service. Thomas Aquinas² described how children are made in part in the image of their parents and therefore naturally belongs to and is valued by them. But they are also made in the image of God and belong to and are valued by Him. Taking the passage in Ephesians 5, he uses the analogy between Christ's sacrificial love for his church, which is steadfast and unbreakable, and a father's love, to reinforce the long-term commitment of fathers and husbands to their children and wives.

Yet the family in the New Testament is seen not just in terms of kinship and marriage, but also as the community of believers. Paul describes the church as a family. The New Testament church met in households, where fellow believers were to be welcomed like relatives. Those baptised, according to Paul, have been adopted by God (Romans 8:15-17, Galatians 3:26-4:6). Their siblings are other Christians. Their inheritance is the community of believers (Mark 10:28-31).

In a culture where the family was more important than all other relationships, the New Testament church was to reach out to the Gentiles and to the unlovely and even to enemies. Clapp suggests, "Paradoxically, a family is enriched when it is de-centred".³ The Christian family is therefore not a safe haven apart from the world, but a powerful witness into the world. Even vulnerable families need to learn the responsibility, but also the joy, of reaching out in hospitality, rather than the fears associated with a 'bunker'

²Barton (1993)

² Pope (1994)

self-preservation mentality which has been so common in an the Cambodian environment of 30 years of war.

Jesus himself reinforced the importance of the community of believers on various occasions. He emphasised his relationship with his heavenly Father (Luke 2:41-52) over his parents, and he described the disciples as his “mother and brothers” over his own family (Mark 3:34-35). Later he says that those who love father or mother more than Jesus are not worthy of him (Matthew 10:37).

This is not to denigrate the family. In a country where the father for many children is absent because of Pol Pot, civil war, abandonment, HIV/AIDS or simply excessive work demands, we need to encourage men to take their responsibility for their wives and children seriously. God sent angels to ensure that Joseph took his responsibility in fathering Jesus seriously and did not abandon Mary as he might have done. God went to some trouble to make sure there was no risk of the breakdown of the marriage of Joseph and Mary, thus ensuring that there were two parents.

How can the church support the family?

Parenting in Scripture is in the context of marriage. This does not mean that in ministry we ignore those who are parenting outside a marriage, but it does mean that we value the relationship between parenting and marriage within the church. The church also needs to find ways to stop men from drifting away from families and parenthood. Cambodian men need to understand that if their families are poor it is not their wives fault. There is no room for fatalism in the church and the church need to challenge such assumptions. Cambodian men also need to understand the importance of faithfulness to their wives and families and avoid promiscuity.

Underpinning and supporting parents is vital. There needs to be encouragement of *parental responsibilities* towards children and the development of a *caring community* around them. “God himself trusted His own Son to humankind as a vulnerable child, requiring that Son to be nurtured by a frail but able family and community, symbolically provid(ing) a model of trust and responsibility...”³.

In the Old Testament, while children were entirely subject to the authority of the head of the household and counted legally as his property, “there was much greater concern with the *responsibility* of the father for his children than with his *rights* over them”(Deuteronomy 21:18-21, 24:16, 2 Kings 14:5-6)⁴. The Shema, the Hebrew confession of faith, was to be impressed on children “when you sit at home, when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” Parental responsibility to teach children the truth about God and godly living was vital. In Proverbs 6:20 children are encouraged to keep their father’s commands and not to forsake their mother’s teaching. Proverbs 22:6 talks about the responsibility of parents to create a desire for spiritual things in children from a young age (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). Men in the church can and should provide role models for children.

³ Viva Network (1997)

⁴ Wright (1997)

In the early church children were encouraged to obey their parents. There is no surprise about this. It is reflecting one of the 10 commandments Moses had received. However, parents were then encouraged to “bring children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:1-4) and fathers were encouraged not to “exasperate your children, in case they lose heart” (Colossians 3:21). Since Paul’s letters were written to be read aloud to the whole church to which they were sent, the fact that he addressed parents **and** children in them is very significant. Firstly, he assumes that children belong to the community of the church and that they would be present at the church gathering when his letters were read. Secondly, he encourages **mutual** responsibilities on parents and children. This is a challenge to the common assumption at that time that the parental role carried with it unlimited authority over the children of the family.

Although parenting does require sacrifices, “loving your neighbour as yourself” is key⁵. ‘Love as equal regard’ provides a balance between modern individualism and the more traditional ethics of extreme duty and self-sacrifice. This understanding of love is especially important for those Cambodian mothers and wives who have “disproportionately carried the burden of enacting self-sacrificial models of Christian love”.

While children can most benefit from being in a two-parent family, this is not always possible and both the Old Testament and New mention the responsibility to orphans and the fatherless. Being an orphan in ancient times meant being deprived of support, losing legal standing and becoming vulnerable to those who would exploit the weak. God is seen as the defender of the fatherless (Deuteronomy 10:18) and the covenant community are encouraged to be similarly compassionate (Exodus 22:27). The same was true of the early church where a “pure and faultless” religion was exemplified by those who “look after orphans and widows” (James 1:27).

The difficulty for the Cambodian church today is that there are many children who do not fit neatly into the two parent family structure. Children may have been separated from one or both parents through war, disaster, accident or ill health of a parent. In the past there have been culturally appropriate ways of absorbing orphans - into the extended family or into a monastery, for example. However in some communities for example those affected greatest by war or those with a high incidence of HIV/AIDS - the community may feel they cannot cope. This is where the supportive environment of the church family can provide a different model than the surrounding community and explore how can we support orphans?

The Cambodian church has many women headed families so pastors need to understand how the situation arose, because the issues they face will vary according to the circumstances. There may be a history of violence and abuse to deal with, or widowhood, desertion or promiscuity. There are no simplistic solutions. The church must first find out what the needs are by gently developing relationships, asking, and then be ready with appropriate support.

⁵ Don Browning (1999)

Grandparents, where available, can have a supportive role and this should be encouraged. In some cases they are the main carers of the child. The influence of peers is also important for children's physical, emotional and spiritual development.

Cambodian churches need to recognise that the number of orphans is likely to increase due to HIV/AIDS and need to be able to take the issue of orphans seriously. One church in Takemao has taken on the responsibility for 17 orphans in a congregation of about 80 people. Various members have opened their homes to children to sleep overnight and then part of the collection money on Sunday goes towards paying for their food. They are taking the Biblical mandate of caring for widows and orphans seriously.

As well as considering what to do with orphans that are in the community the church need to look at how they can prevent children from being 'orphaned' which in Cambodia may mean loss of parents by death or abandoned. Where a marriage is fragile, the church needs to support and strengthen the marriage. In this way it may enable relationships to be restored and prevent family breakdown, violence against women, desertion and divorce. Similarly where parent/child relationships are strained, support of parents in a loving community may prevent child abuse and inter-generational violence. There may be other ways that the church can temporarily look after children until vulnerable parents can develop greater resilience.

The church in Cambodia can provide a model very different from the surrounding community where couples are committed to each other and to their children and are secure enough in God's love that they are willing to reach out to the unlovely and include them as part of their extended family.

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