

**EO Files (May 2014)**

**"THINGS WE DO, PEOPLE WE MEET - Reflections in Brief"**

**All families joined by love are worthy of celebration**

*York Chow says a celebration of family – and the love and commitment it represents – cannot exclude people who happen to fall outside our narrow view of what constitutes the 'ideal' unit*

Recently, my mother left us at the age of 97. We siblings are lucky we had our parents with us for this long. My parents were married for 76 years until my father passed away five years ago. We always felt blessed to have a family where parents, children and grandchildren could gather at festivities to live and laugh, to love and care for each other.

Some of my friends' families look like mine, but some do not. They might have had single parents or been orphans. They might have experienced unhappy marriages, or for various reasons drifted away from their spouses, parents and siblings. They might be marginalised by their relatives or friends because of their sexual orientation, marital status or other issues.

The fact remains that many are my best friends and they are no different from my other friends. Their families might not seem "ideal" to some, but they are still the haven where love is treasured and family members care for each other.

So what makes a family? I find this question worth pondering today, the International Day of Families, observed annually to celebrate the family unit as society's basic building block. Last year, the UN secretary general called family support "more important than ever" in light of shifting social trends, and called on everyone to reflect on what we can do to strengthen families.

So I am troubled, both as a father and a Christian, by some public claims made recently in society that some types of families, particularly those that diverge from the traditional nuclear family model of "father, mother and children", are less worthy of support.

Such contentions were made, for example, at the recent meetings of the bills committee for the government's proposed Marriage (Amendment) Bill, which sought to put into effect the Court of Final Appeal's ruling that transsexuals who have undergone full sex reassignment surgery can be recognised in their acquired gender for marriage.

Many who opposed the bill cited the need to uphold the traditional family value as their reason. They reject other forms of relationships, including those between same-sex couples. Unfortunately, many of these disappointing categorisations were made in the name of religion.

Over the past few decades, the family unit has seen enormous transformations, both in Hong Kong and abroad. Many couples are postponing having children and choosing to have fewer, or none, while some individuals are deciding to have children without a partner. As divorce rates continue to climb, others may choose to be in long-term, committed relationships without marrying.

There is also an increasing number of single-parent families, especially newly arrived single mothers from the mainland. Many experience economic hardship and deteriorating self-esteem due, undoubtedly, to rejection and shame associated with stereotypes.

But just because a family looks less typical does not make it any less devoted or unified. What should matter, surely, is the love and commitment one makes to another family member's growth and well-being. And that has nothing to do with characteristics like race, gender or sexual orientation.

A report published last year by the American Academy of Paediatrics, for example, highlighted the three decades of research which demonstrates that children of same-sex parents have similar levels of resilience as those with opposite-sex parents, despite having to face more social stigma. Specifically, the report pointed out that "children's well-being is affected much more by their relationships with their parents, their parents' sense of competence and security, and the presence of social and economic support for the family than by the gender or the sexual orientation of their

parents”.

Yet damaging stereotypes about non-traditional families remain rife. Sadly, in an international city such as Hong Kong, there are still families who are marginalised or who drop out of religious and social activities for fear of negative comments by others, just because they are not a typical nuclear family.

I have frequently heard of this from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex community, who often face enormous pressure and misunderstanding from their families due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. Not surprisingly, “coming home” remains one of the most difficult things for them.

In a 2012 study by the non-governmental organisation Community Business, only 28 per cent of respondents were fully open with their families about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Among the top three reasons for a lack of openness was the fear their families would neither accept nor understand, and that they might feel ashamed.

Meanwhile, it is not uncommon for parents of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex children to experience a variety of emotions, including self-blame, fear of stigma, worry and confusion, which could lead them to reject their child.

But fears can be dispelled with information designed to educate. As some may seek counselling and psychological support, medical professionals and experts have a key role to play in breaking stereotypes.

We must do better to help families support each other. Rather than stigmatising and excluding parents and families who do not fit the traditional mould, it would be far more constructive to look at how we can support all families to grow to become the healthiest and strongest they can be. This would contribute to the children’s well-being.

We must also build a public environment of mutual respect where open discussions are encouraged. A major step is to put aside unproven generalisations in favour of facts and a closer examination of individual

cases.

Importantly, religious leaders can help open up a dialogue by being role models of acceptance and open-mindedness. Much ostracising and shaming has been done in the name of religion, but there is no reason this cannot change.

As a Christian and a father, I am convinced we should teach our children to embrace the world and its diversity, including the different types of families in society. The positive example of non-discrimination and acceptance would encourage children to grow up to be open-minded, responsible and compassionate citizens. And I have faith that religious leaders of all stripes may yet call on each person to treat another with compassion, respect and love, irrespective of their disagreements and differences. That, to me, is truly what makes a family.

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(Note: A version of this article was originally published in the South China Morning Post on 15 May 2014.)