

GUELPH MERCURY

Three-parent ruling lauded, decried; Both sides vocal in local reaction to court decision

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GREG MERCER

It either signals further destruction of traditional families, or it's a recognition most families today are anything but.

However you view it, this week's Appeal Court decision to grant a five-year-old boy three legal parents has certainly got the attention of gay rights advocates and religious leaders in town.

Karen Wendling, who with her partner was among Guelph's first same-sex couples to wed in 2003, said the landmark decision recognizes loving families don't always come in a two-parent mould.

"More parents who love a child is a good thing. Why would anybody object to having more people who love a child?" she said. "It seems to me this is a benefit for the child."

Vast numbers of children already have multiple parents in the form of step-parents or step-grandparents, said Wendling, who teaches philosophy at the University of Guelph.

"It's artificial that children can only have two parents. Many children already have three or four parents, through step-parents and things. This just legally recognizes something that's already the case," she said.

Reverend Royal Hamel, a Guelph resident who preaches part-time at a church in Harriston, calls the court decision another step in the "ongoing deconstruction of the family."

"It's a profound mistake for our society to be heading in this direction, and it's a direct result of the whole issue of same-sex marriage," Hamel said. "If gender in marriage is of no concern, then why should the quantity of people in marriage be a concern to anyone?"

The ideal model for raising children remains the biological mother and father, the model endorsed by Jesus, Hamel said. Multiple parents beyond two decrease the quality of parenting a child gets, he argues.

"For every pseudo parent that you add, instead of increasing the quality of the parenting, you dilute it," Hamel said. "The child will grow up without a true mom and dad."

Dave Quist, executive director of the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, the Ottawa-based policy wing of Focus on the Family, thinks this sort of decision should be left up to elected governments.

Judges are not publicly accountable and offer no opportunity for public debate, he said.

"It fundamentally changes the view of what the family is. It's a social engineering decision," he said. "Does this go to three, then four or five parents somewhere down the road? We've lowered the bar for kids."

The decision opens the door to polygamy and to sperm donors demanding full rights as a third parent, he said. Quist predicts the boy at the centre of this week's decision will "see court an awful lot," and that the case will create headaches for divorce courts.

"Divorce is messy enough as it is. This opens the door to more than that," he said.

But Jacqueline Murray, a University of Guelph history professor who studies pre-modern families, says the two-parent model is an outdated and unrealistic construct left over from the 1950s.

"We have a falsely romantic view of the notion of the family in the past. I think our society tends to look at the family as some marvellous 'Leave it to Beaver' ideal," she said. "It's idealized and it's not fact."

Throughout history, blended families with moms, dads, relatives and grandparents sharing parental duties have been the norm, Murray said. Only in the last century have parental death rates dropped and the mom-and-dad model taken prominence.

This week's court decision simply catches up with modern society and puts the best interest of children first, she said.

"Children turn out best if they're in a stable household and if they are with people who care for them, whoever those people are," Murray said.

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