



Social justice and the family

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The following is based on a talk given for the Christian Legal Fellowship about the connections between strong families and social justice.



Jane was very unhappy in her marriage. She had two young children and it had been difficult for years. One day, I asked her how things were going. To my surprise, she reported that everything was great.

Great, she explained, because she had decided they were getting a divorce. That's when I noticed she wasn't wearing her ring.

So much flashed through my mind. It was obvious divorce was her great escape from

her current woes. And yet, when there is no abuse, divorce is not a good option.

Women and children suffer more financially in a divorce than men.¹ Canadian researchers Finnie and Sweetman have shown that moving from a single to a couple family lifts more than half of formerly poor singles out of poverty.² *Between Two Worlds* is a book about how the children of divorce feel and fare, even into adulthood, when their lives are split between two homes.³

Then there's the research showing that divorce doesn't bring about happiness. A 2002 study reports: "Among those who rated their marriages as very unhappy, almost eight out of ten who avoided divorce were happily married five years later."⁴

While divorce brings anguish, nonetheless, it remains unpopular to say these things. That's why I was surprised to hear singer/songwriter Susan Aglukark muse at a recent conference about the family that if parents are not present in a child's life, no amount of intervention can replace that.⁵

That's the heart of the matter. Where parents are not present, no amount of intervention can replace that.

Fertile ground for human flourishing

The IMFC is dedicated to studying marriage and family with an eye to defending and promoting these institutions in the public square using research and statistics. We want to chronicle whether marriage, divorce, fertility or cohabitation rates go up or down. We want to see whether marriages that start earlier or later last longer. We want to know what factors contribute to stable, long lasting marriages.

But it's not about the statistics. Human flourishing—ensuring people thrive—is why we work.

When we think of social justice—we may think of eradicating human trafficking, accommodating refugees or decreasing homelessness. We think of increasing opportunity for all, regardless of name or status.

Stable, intact families are the backdrop for all of these valuable efforts, the ground from which stability—or instability—grows. **“An effective social justice strategy cultivates the ground in which healthy relationships can bloom, heal, and thrive.”**⁶

Today in North America, particularly in international comparison, we are money rich but relationship poor. Poverty has a relational component. Post-sexual revolution, the very relationships that support us and infuse meaning into our existence have grown weaker.

Marriage is the most stable family form and it's on the decline, where other family forms are increasing. Instead of rightfully being concerned, we applaud diversity.

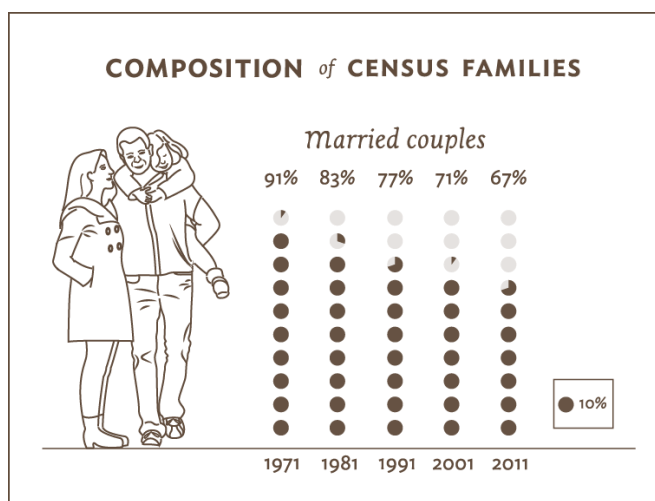
In 2014, we worked on a project called the Canadian Marriage Gap. It identified the growing divide between those who get married and those who don't. People in the wealthiest quartile are far more likely to be married than those in the poorest quartile. And, according to the researchers, “[m]arriage declined more amongst mid and low income earners, causing the “marriage gap” to widen.”⁷

In Canada, in 2011, roughly 67% of census families were married couples. This declined from 91% in 1971.⁸

In Canada, common law has increased from 6% in 1981 to 17% in 2011.

Lone parent families have also increased.

Only 8% of couple households with children are in poverty. But 32% of single mother households live in poverty.⁹ That means single mother households are four times more likely to be poor than a couple household.



The Centre for Social Justice in the United Kingdom identifies through substantial research that there are five pathways to poverty: 1) worklessness 2) addiction 3) educational failure 4) serious personal debt and 5) family breakdown.¹⁰

We focus on the one aspect—family breakdown—at the IMFC.

Family breakdown can be defined narrowly or broadly. We see it as “the effects of having given up on the ideal of a man and a woman marrying, raising children together and staying together to watch their grandchildren grow. Family breakdown is not just one act, such as a divorce or the break-up of a couple with children who have been co-habiting for a long time. It also includes the growing category of single mothers who have never been married or never lived with the father of their babies. As such, family breakdown involves the creation of families broken from the start.”¹¹

When relationships falter

When my friend told me of her pending divorce, I kicked into high gear. I brought her lattes and literature. Lattes because they are tasty. Literature because I knew what she was seeing: People get divorced all the time and it doesn’t matter if I do.

It just so happens in this case that Jane stayed with her marriage. Yet if I had not known what was at (possible) stake for her, I wouldn’t have reacted the way I did.

We often hear that aspects of family life are mundane. To us, this is never true. It’s nothing more than a minor miracle when families function. We can’t take this for granted, neither can or should we look the other way when our friends and family hit a rough patch in their marriage. It’s not that we must save every marriage, at all costs. It’s that the usual response of “you gotta do what you gotta do” doesn’t begin to reflect the personal and public devastation of family breakdown.

For all of us, it’s “when” not “if” for relationship trouble. We should all strive to help those we know in low-conflict marriages make it better, not get out.

This is first and foremost for the people involved, but after that, it doesn’t hurt to know one is increasing the odds of justice being served in this world.

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¹ For more on the financial impacts of divorce, please see

http://www.imfcanada.org/sites/default/files/images/Family_Facts_Detrimental_infographic.png

² Finnie, R. and Sweetman, A. (2003). Poverty dynamics: empirical evidence for Canada. *Canadian Journal of Economics*, 36 (2), p. 306.

³ Marquardt, E. (2006). *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

⁴ Waite, L., Browning, D., Doherty, W., Gallagher, M., Luo, Y., and Stanley, S. (2002). Does divorce make people happy? Findings from a study of unhappy marriages. New York: Institute for American Values, p. 5. Retrieved from http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/does_divorce_make_people_happy.pdf

⁵ Susan Aglukark was a speaker and performer at the Vanier Institute for the Family June 10-11, 2015 Families in Canada conference: http://www.vanierinstitute.ca/fic_susan-aglukark

⁶ Seek Social Justice, Transforming Lives in Need is a series of DVDs with study guide published by the Heritage Foundation. Retrieved from <http://seeksocialjustice.com/>

⁷ Cross, P. and Mitchell, P.J. (2013). The marriage gap between rich and poor Canadians. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.imfcanada.org/sites/default/files/event/CMD-FINAL.pdf>

⁸ For more on marriage trends in Canada, please see <http://www.imfcanada.org/fact-sheet/marriage-trends-canada>

⁹ For more on family breakdown in Canada, please see <http://www.imfcanada.org/fact-sheet/family-breakdown-and-poverty>

¹⁰ A wealth of information about the impact of family breakdown on social justice can be found at <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/published-policy/families-children-and-early-intervention>

¹¹ Walberg, R. and Mrozek, A. (2009). Private choices, public costs. How failing families cost us all. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, p. 7. Retrieved from http://www.imfcanada.org/sites/default/files/Cost%20of%20Family%20Breakdown%20final_0.pdf