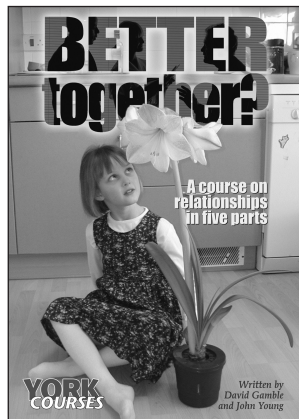


SESSION 1

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS



A time of change

We are living at a time of rapid change in family life, when many talk of the 'decline of the traditional family'. Compared with most of the twentieth century:

- fewer people in Britain get married nowadays
- people often marry at a later age and have fewer, if any, children
- more unmarried couples live together, though 'common law marriage' has no legal status
- same-sex couples live together openly and sometimes care for children
- more (but not most) marriages end in divorce
- more children are born outside marriage than in the recent past
- there are more teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases are widespread
- more children are being raised by a single parent
- fathers are playing a greater role in rearing children though women – including working mothers – continue to provide most child care.

Not all changes in family life are seen by everyone as bad news. What some bemoan as signs of decline, others celebrate as rich diversity. Nuclear families; step – or 'blended' – families; three or four generation families; adoption; same-sex relationships; families of choice ... these varied arrangements are found on every street and in every school. It was a positive view of diversity that led those preparing a 1995 Church of England report to call it *Something to Celebrate*.

Some people, especially those not living in 'traditional' family settings, may not see churches as welcoming or understanding. They may feel excluded from church because of their chosen lifestyle. Their perception may well be mistaken, of course. They would be surprised to learn that some people who carry responsibility in the church down the road are themselves divorced or separated or in an abusive relationship or with out-of-control children. The church isn't crammed with people who live model lives. It's there for people who need all the help they can get – and who see the gospel as a priceless resource for living in the twenty-first century.

The Bible and family life

How does experience of family life in the twenty-first century relate to the Bible and Christian tradition? The

A survey carried out in 2002 for the report, *Just a piece of paper? Marriage and cohabitation*, found that 59% of respondents viewed marriage as the best kind of relationship.