

Europe and Family Policy

**A Discussion Paper of the Church and Society Commission
of the Conference of European Churches**

Love, Solidarity and Education at the Heart of our Societies

Executive Summary

1. Families are a crucial pillar for the well-being and stability of society. There is no better way and indeed no more cost-effective way, for states or societies to provide the care, education and socialisation that families offer. States therefore need to give high priority to both the financial and the educational and social support of families. Not to do so will be extremely costly both in financial terms and in terms of social cohesion and solidarity.
2. Family life has always varied from one part of Europe to another. Nowadays, with substantial changes in attitudes and behaviour in the area of marriage, child-bearing and sexuality, we see an increasing variety of patterns of family life across Europe. More and more people live alone, and there are many lone-parent families or "reconstituted families" following remarriage after divorce. It is no longer possible to speak of "the family" as a uniform entity.
3. On the basis of biblical teaching, the members of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) recognise a special responsibility for families, children and the elderly. They therefore engage in various projects to support families all over Europe and they seek to provide special care and counselling for families. Churches in Europe urge European countries and, in particular the European Union and its Member States, to maintain a sustainable and supportive framework for families.
4. Such provision includes supporting children through financial benefits; providing child care to help parents balance work and family commitments; and regulating working hours so that parents do not have to choose between spending sufficient time with their children and being able to provide for their material needs. It will also include, however, the option for one parent to give more of their time to the care of their children without being unduly disadvantaged financially.
5. Education is an important element of family policies in contemporary societies. It covers different areas, including good parenting, educating families to help themselves, early childhood education and training for active citizenship and life in a democratic society. The challenge is to enable all people to make an active and valuable contribution to the life of society, irrespective of their economic and social background.

6. The costs of family life still fall disproportionately on women. This is especially clear when marriages break up: women are often left having to cope with the main responsibility for bringing up children on a much reduced income and in inadequate housing.
7. Migrant families need specific support and governments should pay special attention to the protection of children with a migrant background. It would be quite wrong to suggest or to imply that "European" children are more important than the children who arrive with their families as migrants.
8. At the same time, it has to be recognised that family life is not always experienced as positive and beneficial. Where families fail to provide a secure and safe environment for all their members, and especially for children, the State must be prepared to intervene.
9. Our societies also need to rediscover the interdependence between generations and to reinforce their links in many ways. Elderly people need contact with young people just as the young need the old. CEC member churches wish to underline the need to respect older people and to recognise the contribution they make to society. At the same time the older generation has specific responsibility for the welfare of future generations.
10. Churches in Europe believe families to be schools for human living where people are nurtured and sustained in mutual love and responsibility, respect and fidelity. Family life teaches people to recognise their own limitations and weaknesses and to tolerate those of others.

1. Families in Europe today

Families are at the same time one of the most important and one of the most fragile elements of modern societies. They play an irreplaceable part in bringing up and educating the future generation. They provide care for their more vulnerable members, such as the elderly and the disabled. They are a major component of social cohesion; and they are places where people can learn how to treat one another with love, respect, reliability and responsibility as well as how to care for one another. Families are the centre of human networks including not only parents and children, but also relatives such as grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins and others, who may or may not be living under one roof. All in all, families can be considered as the cornerstone of strong and cohesive societies where human beings grow up in a safe environment and are prepared for their future lives as responsible members of society.

Contrary to what we often imagine to have been the case, there has never been a uniform model of family life and family composition, either across Europe or within individual societies. Certainly European societies today are characterised by a great diversity of family forms. Households have been becoming smaller for many years. Many adults live alone for a variety of reasons; and couples have fewer children than in the past, and they tend to have them later in life. Couples no longer see marriage as an essential preliminary to living together, or even to having children. Many marriages end in divorce, often followed by remarriage or living together with a new partner, which means that children often find themselves living in lone parent families – or with step-parents and half-brothers or sisters in “reconstituted” families. Moreover, families may also need to provide a home for elderly members, who often have substantial needs for care.

This growing complexity of family forms is often seen as constituting a “decline” in the family. It is interesting to observe, therefore, that surveys consistently reveal that young adults in Europe continue to ascribe very high value to the family. But we see a widespread hesitation to “settle down” in permanent couples and to found new families. Thus, fewer and fewer marriages are being contracted and they are taking place later in life; couples are having children later too. From a sociological point of view, there is an increasing gap between the time when young people become biologically mature and the time when they found a family. Furthermore, there is a gap between the number of children young Europeans consider ideal in a family and the number of children they actually have. These trends are having a striking effect on the demographic development of European countries: fewer children are being born, the population is ageing, and hardly any European countries will maintain the renewal of generations in the long term.

Our societies rely on families to fulfil a range of vital educational and caring tasks. These tasks are usually willingly assumed, but social and economic trends can make them become an almost unbearable burden. Poverty, unemployment and low wages make it hard for many European families to make ends meet and parents may find themselves unable to offer their children the full range of opportunities available in society. With a growing gap between rich and poor, child poverty is an increasing worry and it becomes more difficult for children from poor backgrounds to benefit from social mobility. Family origin and educational opportunities in Europe are too closely connected, with the result that social discrepancies are increasing. If families are to fulfil their tasks and responsibilities, they need a family-friendly context. It is very much in the interests of society as a whole to put in place public policies that support families in their daily lives, for example by creating working conditions that allow people to combine working life and family life, and by supporting common values such as human dignity, justice, solidarity and gender equality.

While always stressing the importance of families for well-functioning societies, we must never forget that by no means everyone experiences family life as something positive. The close-knit traditional family, characterised by strong paternal authority, may be

experienced as stifling and oppressive. In all societies, some families are places of fear, violence and abuse for their more vulnerable members. A not insignificant number of people therefore need to be released or protected from their families, and there may be a need for the State to step in to protect individuals from their dysfunctional families.

For the Conference of European Churches, concern for families is based on the Christian understanding of love for the neighbour (Mk 12,31). Churches in Europe therefore call for vigorous efforts to improve the material security and social protection of families and to provide the necessary infrastructure. This further implies the care, protection and socialisation of children; the maintenance of solidarity between the generations; the sharing of domestic and other roles; and the placing of love, respect and good education at the heart of human life and of our societies.

2. Families in a Christian Perspective

The concern of the churches for families is based on the biblical tradition. In the creation stories it is made clear that women and men are not intended to live alone and two of the Ten Commandments relate to the honouring of family commitments to parents and to spouse.

The Bible stresses the importance of families for the social protection of vulnerable people. At a time where no public welfare systems existed, families played a crucial part in caring for people in need like widows and orphans (cf. Deuteronomy 25,5). The Bible proclaims on many occasions the mutual responsibility of the different generations for each other (Exodus 20,12 or Numbers 27,1-11).

Jesus built on that tradition. He welcomes children and warns adults not to neglect the respect due to the youngest members of society: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18,3). Jesus stresses the responsibility of married people for each other, knowing that divorce at his time usually meant a perilous risk for the woman, who was abandoned without any income (Matthew 19,6). Nevertheless he refused to condemn the woman taken in adultery (John 8,11).

We should beware of claiming too much, however. Jesus ascribed supreme value to entry into the community of the kingdom of heaven, and saw that this could sometimes involve a conflict with normal family ties. Thus, he also extended the concept of family to all those who do the will of the heavenly Father (Matthew 12,50) and demanded that his followers love him more than their parents or their children (Matthew 10,37). That thought – that all relations are based on the relation to God – is a key element in the New Testament. It also means that relations inside the family should reflect the way in which Jesus himself served others. (Colossians 3, 18-22).

In the Christian understanding, marriage represents a stable and permanent commitment to the partner. The churches are convinced that such reliable commitments are a vital basis for society. Throughout history and in all societies, a strong relationship has been proved to be a supportive environment in which to bring up children and to care for the elderly. But the churches are also aware that relationships may fail and that there are situations in which it is necessary for the well-being of family members, especially women and children, to be protected against abuses of commitment and trust within the family.

At different times, and in different parts of Europe, different societies have given priority to the individual, to the family or to society as a whole. Christian teaching balance all three – the individual relationship with God, the duty to and strength derived from the family and the unique value of each member, a balance which is exemplified above all within the Church, the Body of Christ embracing both family and individual.

3. The Role of the Churches

By offering effective services for family support and life advice, and through their involvement in various forms of family education, such as child-care facilities schools and colleges, the churches in Europe seek to teach Christian values, to assist with individual orientation and to help families solve their conflicts and deal with critical life situations. This can cover a many different types of support, such as making church life more family-friendly, supporting children and young people, and also care for older people, thus contributing to solidarity between generations. Churches provide support to parents and carers in their own homes, helping them in their role as parents as well as with the challenges they may face in their own lives; they also provide respite and crisis care for children with learning and physical disabilities.

Furthermore, churches accompany people in transition situations. They offer advice and training, and produce materials and organise projects to support parish workers in the field of marriage and family counselling. Work with children, pre-teenagers and young people are important aspects of parish activities. Church rites such as baptism or confirmation play a significant role in accompanying people through the course of their life. Thus, churches support not only people's socialisation but also their spiritual development and the development of life skills.

4. A Framework for Families: Accommodating Life Plans

Society needs to give fuller recognition to the vital functions fulfilled by families. These include bringing up children, providing people's immediate social network, and caring for the needy. We need to make people more aware of the value provided by families and to develop new ideas for supporting family life. A major challenge for family policies today is to ensure an equitable distribution of burdens.

Material Security

The economic conditions for families have dramatically changed in recent years. Although Europe is one of the wealthiest regions of the world, problems of child poverty and social exclusion remain acute. Single parent families and large families carry the highest poverty risk in European societies. Poverty within families is not just serious in itself; it is linked to other welfare issues, for instance violence, homelessness and educational disadvantage. Homelessness and poor housing conditions have a particularly serious impact on children because they deprive them of the right to grow up with proper care and shelter.

Poverty and unemployment make it hard for people to commit to stable relationships. They damage self-esteem and undermine mutual respect. Unemployment has been shown to be an important cause of divorce and family breakdown. Relations between parents and children are made more difficult if either or both parents are out of work. Many families are adversely affected by a burden of debt or over-indebtedness. The decision to bring up children often means not only that the caring parent gives up current income, but also that he or (much more often) she can expect lower income and poorer social protection in the future. Even today, the decision to have children very often limits parents' career prospects. Child costs bear predominantly on families. Hence, families with children have a far lower disposable income than childless families.

Active Inclusion

Churches in Europe therefore urge European governments and the European Union to put families, children and youth at the centre of their active social inclusion policies. Societies need to develop a more positive view of children, rather than marginalising them, as sometimes happens these days. The aim should be to empower children and their families to be key actors in shaping their own future – a future in which they do not merely cope, but flourish. To this end, it is essential, by means of carefully designed

education and social services, to improve life chances for children and to break cycles of deprivation. Multidimensional responses are needed in order to provide holistic and integrated services capable of tackling the many dimensions of poverty.

Adequate Child Benefit

Adequate levels of social benefits are essential if families are to secure their material basis without recourse to social assistance. CEC member churches believe strongly that families should not be forced into dependence on welfare assistance in order to care for their children.

Reduced Taxes for Families

Many countries use their tax systems to help families. As child-rearing is a significant financial burden, fiscal policy is an appropriate way to support parents. In France, for instance, couples can split their income between themselves and their children for income tax purposes. One could go a step further and encourage cross-generational family solidarity by allowing income to be assigned to any relative living at the same address. A couple who took responsibility for caring for their elderly parents, for example, could assign part of their income to them and pay less tax. Another possibility would be to support parents of young children by introducing reduced rates of VAT on essential child care items. Families with children cannot manage without access to a minimum of material equipment, and a lack of basic equipment must not be a reason for not having a family.

Family-friendly measures

The Churches consider that parents ought to be free to decide for themselves whether one parent stays at home in order to bring up their children. It is not only mothers who would in many cases like to be able to spend more time with their children: many fathers too are dissatisfied because their long hours of work restrict the time they can spend with their children. Findings from various surveys show that fathers and mothers are often not able to organise their family life as they would wish because of inadequate work and care arrangements. For many parents who choose to go on working the provision of quality care for their children during the working day is an essential condition for the smooth running of family life.

Childcare

The CEC member churches therefore urge European countries to ensure flexible and affordable high quality childcare facilities, covering in particular core times in schools, so as to support diverse working patterns for parents as well as meeting the business need to deploy the workforce. Places in day care facilities are not always guaranteed. In too many cases care is available only for a few hours. A sufficient number of whole day care places is necessary. This also applies to children under three and over six years old. At the same time, the quality of childcare must receive due attention.

Childcare facilities are important not only for the work-life balance. They also contribute in their own right to the education of children. They make a decisive contribution to equal opportunities with regard to the life and learning possibilities and integration of children. Childcare facilities capable of performing this educational and integration function should be guaranteed in all European countries.

Specific Support for Single-Parent Families

There is a urgent need to provide specific support for single-parent families. Research shows that single-parent families find themselves under much more pressure economically than two-parent families. They are exceptionally hard hit by poverty¹ and indeed one single-parent family in three falls into the category of the working poor. Specific support to finance their needs, such as day care facilities, would be helpful.

¹ Poverty and Social Exclusion Report: February 2010. p.30

Gender Aspects

Despite the fact that the EU and some of its Member States have focussed in recent years on gender discrimination, sex-specific disadvantage still plays a significant role within the labour market and especially in the field of family policy. Women and men are equally concerned by these inequalities, but in different ways. Gender imbalances in working life have consequences for family life. Families should be free to decide how they manage the family tasks without facing serious consequences (e.g. reduced income) in their working lives as a result of their decision.

Combating Discrimination against Women

Much discrimination against women is the result of family break-up as in most cases women then find themselves taking over the main responsibility for bringing up children. Single-parenthood is difficult enough as it is without having to cope with additional material and social disadvantages. Furthermore, women experience discrimination through lower salaries and the fact that pensions do not usually take account of the time spent bringing up a family. Continuing salary imbalances due to gender need to be levelled. Across Europe women earn on average 17.8% less than men and in some countries the gender pay gap is indeed widening. The pay gap is linked to a number of legal, social and economic factors which go far beyond the single issue of equal pay for equal work. It has various consequences for the role of women in family life.

In addition, traditional gender roles mean that women often do not have the same opportunities and freedoms as men. With changes in the pension system and improved rules for maternity and parental leave, discrimination against women could be reduced. It is, however, not only a question of structural changes but also of awareness and a willingness on the part of society as a whole to reduce existing imbalances. Men who want to invest more time in their family should be able to do so. This is only possible where companies start to develop flexible models for men too (part time work, job-sharing, extending to those in positions of responsibility etc.). This is necessary if we are to ensure that the reconciliation of work and family life ceases to be mainly the responsibility of women and that women are not disadvantaged because of motherhood. Men, women and society as a whole are equally responsible for creating the conditions for real equality in family and working life. Social, organisational and other competences gained through family work should be fully recognised both by employers and by social protection schemes.

Gender-Neutral Parental Leave

CEC urges the introduction of gender-neutral parental leave. Churches in Europe welcome proposals for giving parents time together around the time of the birth of a child and support models of good practice which include both parents or either parent working fewer hours in order to give space to the family. This implies greater flexibility in paternity and parental leave including the possibility of taking paternity, maternity and parental leave in days, weeks or longer periods, with temporary part-time work as an additional option. Furthermore, increasing men's take-up of family leave and making it longer, more flexible and better paid, would fit in with parents' attitudes which in many cases have shifted away from the more traditional role. Companies and policies should encourage young fathers to engage in family work and make sure that this does not have negative consequences for their positions and careers. Fathers' leave should be seen as an add-on to mothers' leave, providing additional support for the family.

Education for Good Parenting

Parents today are challenged by increased expectations in the area of child-rearing. Responsibility for children and youngsters now requires parents to acquire more and more competences. For some this leads to feelings of personal insecurity in bringing up their children. Parents are looking for orientation and support. Good parenting programmes emphasise the importance of parents' role in bringing up their children. To ensure successful bringing up of children, families need to be strengthened as spaces of stability, protection, responsibility, care and religious experience. Education and advice

services, upbringing and care are the essential areas for supporting children and parents. Teaching families to make better use of their time is another aspect of parental education.

Another keyword is courage. Young parents with courage cope with difficult circumstances. Family-centred services that support parents in their role rather than taking over their role are therefore preferable.

CEC advocates an ambitious expansion in the provision of parental and family education, counselling and family help. The member churches urge integrating these life-accompanying services into child care facilities and schools, these being places where, parents can be more easily reached. The churches in Europe will give continuing support to parents in their task of bringing up children in accordance with worthwhile values.

Financial education of parents needs to be given high priority. In order to live a normal life and to be able to access and use financial services, parents need financial knowledge and practical skills together with social awareness.

All these aspects of good parenting can contribute to the improvement of living conditions and the quality of family life. Enabling parents to give loving care is rarely seen as being as important as giving material support. Therefore, CEC is keen to raise public awareness of this challenge.

Work/Life-Balance

Work/life-balance is an issue for all workers, not just those with children. Policies concerning work/life-balance have to be seen in a wide context: they are important for individuals, for families and for communities as well as for the European economy.

The long-hours working culture has not benefited families particularly as women still carry by far the greatest share of responsibility for child-rearing. . In order to help people achieve a better work/life balance in the interests of family life, what is required is a combination of policies around childcare, maternity and paternity leave, fiscal support for those who give unpaid care, flexible working hours, career breaks, elder care provision, regulation of working hours and avoidance of penalties in pensions or conditions of service for those who take advantage of some of these measures.

Flexibility in working life

Flexibility in working life can give parents, especially men, a better chance of shaping their lives and should reduce the risk that parents of young children pay a career penalty for working flexibly. EU Member States should provide a legal framework for more flexible working conditions for women and men, enabling them to play their part in family life and childcare, as well as in social volunteering, without losing continuity in social security and services. The comparison of the experiences in different Member States shows that stable policies for a better combination of work and family life have a lasting positive effect on family formation by young couples.

Local Alliances

Forming alliances between local people and firms is one important way of achieving a better work/life-balance. The principle of such local alliances is to link local or regional enterprises with families working at them or living in their vicinity so as to help them arrive at a better work-life-balance. This is achieved mainly by introducing more flexible working hours or by providing additional child care facilities in or near the workplace. It is important, however, that these new alliances do not replace well-functioning social services already on the spot.²

² Links to local alliances...

Keeping Sunday free

One major element in keeping a sound work/life-balance is to keep Sunday free of work. Sunday should be recognised throughout Europe as a day for families to be together and to share experiences as well as being a time in which to recuperate. This is not only a Christian application of the third commandment, concerning the keeping of the Sabbath; it also helps promote social cohesion by giving people time together, an experience which, moreover, is shared by rich and poor.. Thus, each weekly day of rest, each Sunday, brings to mind the need for shared time and equality, and renewal as God's will for all.

Migration and Family Reunification

Migration often results in the division of families, either because one member of the family migrates to another country to work there, or because the family is torn apart through escape or expulsion, in which case family members may find themselves scattered over different countries. Where family reunification is impossible, children are often the first victims: they may be entrusted to people they hardly know and brought up in a social context in which parental love and upbringing by mother and/or father are absent. Churches in Europe have pointed out on many occasions that family reunion must be an integral part of any coherent migration policy.

The European Convention on Human Rights as well as the International Convention on the Rights of the Child make it obligatory to safeguard and protect families. The age of the child at the time of the application should be an important factor in decisions on family reunification. It should be accepted as a basic principle that minor children should be able to live with their families.

Migrant families face numerous difficulties when they try to integrate into a new society. The family dimension of integration has often received inadequate attention. The churches in Europe therefore support measures to help migrant families facing social exclusion. There should, for example, be specific provision to help children with a migrant background get acquainted with the culture of their host country, e.g. language courses, bilingual classes and special remedial teaching, as well as other measures to avoid or overcome exclusion. At the same time such measures should be designed in such a way as to foster dialogue between different cultures, religions and traditions in European societies. Integration always needs to be a reciprocal process.

5. Promoting the best interests of the Child

Fundamental Rights of Children

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the first legally binding international instrument to cover the full range of human rights for children, including civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. It is based on the realisation that children need specific legal protection. Protection of this kind is also reflected in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union which promulgates a specific right to protection and care for the well-being of children and stresses that, "in all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, the child's best interests must be a primary consideration".³

As children are the most vulnerable members of society, they need special attention and special protection. Like adults, they need food, shelter, clothing, health care and emotional well-being, and they must, in addition, be protected from forced labour and physical, emotional and sexual exploitation and abuse.⁴ European societies ought to be places where children are listened to, given a sense of belonging, where they are

³ Art. 24,2 Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union

⁴ Cf. art. 32.

nurtured and kept safe, and in which parents and those who work with children are supported and encouraged.

Educational Equality

The relationships, guidance and skills experienced by children in daily family life are the determining basis for their personal development. They play a decisive role in children's school performance, motivation and learning abilities. In all European countries the family of origin has an important impact on the educational opportunities of the children, and on their opportunities to participate in the life of society and to develop their own gifts and talents.

Child-Centred Services

The commitment to the bringing up of young people must be strengthened at all levels so that disadvantage related to social background can be overcome. Child-centred services must see children and young people in the context of all their relationships and their involvement with the wider community. CEC supports the development of school systems and innovative methods of education designed to assist each child in reaching his or her complete fulfilment as an individual.

Participatory Justice and Early Education

For the churches it is a question of participatory justice to enable everyone to contribute to society. Christian social teaching recognises that people are different, have differing abilities, and that some are able to achieve more than others. But it does not accept a society in which individuals do not benefit from equal participation. Whenever the constraints are too great, it is the duty of society as a whole to enable children to live their lives in dignity.

In particular, CEC member churches support educational programmes which strengthen education from the earliest age. The importance of early education – and not only childcare – for the very young is clear. It is widely recognised that providing adequate support for 1-3 year olds can save high costs for society later on. It can ensure better performance at school, better health, contact with families in difficulty and better integration of migrants. Improving the pedagogical quality of child care facilities and schools helps to ensure equal opportunities for all children. Moreover, the development of all-day childcare facilities makes it possible to deal with children and youngsters, whatever their social background, in a holistic manner, seeing their spiritual, emotional, social and physical development as a whole.

Building Citizenship

Last but not least, it is desirable to help children develop life skills and a sense of citizenship by enabling them to enjoy active democratic participation. Many young people in European societies find full participation in society difficult. Measures that encourage the involvement of young people in decision-making processes can help to eliminate discrimination and exploitation. Creative and appropriate employment opportunities should be legally and socially accessible for young people. Education and lifelong learning, health, sports youth autonomy and mobility are the necessary preconditions for this.

Combating Violence and Abuse

All too often, in the past as well as at the present day, families are experienced as places of violence and oppression rather than places of strength and support. The incidence and the legacy of child abuse are enormous – and far higher than most people are willing to contemplate. Voluntary and statutory agencies see a continuing demand for any service that helps adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse – abuse that has usually taken place within the family. Family violence and abuse in all forms is a big verbal, psychological, physical and sexual threat and is grossly detrimental to the cohesion of the human community.

The churches in Europe call on the authorities to provide a safe environment for victims, together with counsel and support. It is unrealistic and dangerous to expect individuals affected by violence to live under the same roof as the abuser. Women and men need to know that where there is no safety in marriage there is no sanctity; in other words, the marriage vows have been broken by the abuser. It is important to get the dependent parties in such relationships out of their situation of dependency and bring them into a situation of protection and support. Work with children whose parents' relationships have degenerated into violence is also vital. The big task of churches and society is to prevent this dysfunction of families from arising.

Churches also recognise their own responsibility concerning violence and abuse. They have to take specific measures to make sure that child abuse is impossible in the church context. Culprits have to be brought to trial irrespective of the person concerned or their position. All members of society must be carefully protected from sexual and other forms of abuse.

Responsible Usage and Dealing with Medias

Modern information and communication technologies have led to a remarkable opening up of access to information and to the possibility of social interaction.

Like all technologies, however, information and communication technologies can be put to both good and bad uses. A large proportion of young people's time is taken up by television, computers, mobile phones, etc. This often happens in an unreflective way and the flood of images and information can exceed the human ability for handling it. With children and indeed adults this can lead to excessive demands and sensory overload.

It is necessary, on the one hand, to encourage the educational use of information and communication technologies while, on the other hand, speaking out against media products which risk injuring the mind and soul of children and youngsters. CEC calls for the establishment of effective controlling mechanisms, particularly for private suppliers. The churches in Europe support education programmes in media awareness as a means of equipping young people to approach the media in a self-confident, creative and critical manner.

6. Intergenerational Justice and Caring for Older People

European society is ambivalent about aging. On the one hand, aging is perceived as a loss, a decline from the best in life, a major demographic problem, a drain on the economy and something which could overwhelm the health system. On the other hand, aging is seen as the time of maturity and wisdom, a release from the stress of working life, a time of self-fulfilment and serenity, and an opportunity to hand on power and knowledge to the next generation.

Christian Churches in Europe seek to present a vision of aging drawn from wider Christian values. Aging should not be reduced to a negative social phenomenon. There is a need to recover a sense of the value of age in the sound functioning of society, in the creation of social networks and in the realities of everyday life. This means finding a spiritual and societal vision of the cohabitation of all generations. The Bible frequently stresses the need to respect old people. From a Christian point of view, the fact of being old, or of having completed one's working life, does not affect one's dignity. Respect for the elderly also therefore includes stimulating the self-respect of elderly people themselves.

Security and Flexibility

The CEC Member Churches support social policies that integrate the elderly into the life of the community as a whole, including adequate incomes, increased and non-discriminatory employment opportunities, educational and service opportunities, and

adequate medical care and housing within existing communities. Social policies and programmes are needed that ensure respect and dignity for ageing people.

In some European countries, pension systems are still not neutral regarding the sharing of parental tasks in families. Thus, only parents who are gainfully employed can expect to claim a pension, while parents who stay at home to bring up their children will not be able to claim a pension. The effect of such pension arrangements is to discriminate against women. Times of parental leave should be recognised in pension systems and the state should recognise the special contribution to society of parents bringing up their children.

Furthermore, pension systems need to be sustainable and to ensure intergenerational justice through fair sharing of costs for health care. Changes in the retirement system will require a paradigm shift in European societies away from the prevalent obsession with youth. On the one hand, the current application of statutory retirement ages may lead to discrimination against elderly people and waste of their capacities. Economically it does not make sense to exclude from work people who would like to continue to work, thus wasting their competences, their knowledge and their experience. For these reasons, churches and diaconal organisations support more flexible, gradual retirement procedures. On the other hand, changes in retirement regulations have to take very seriously into account the differing burdens experienced by people during their working lives. In many fields of work, the introduction of an earlier retirement age was a major step forward in the social and health protection of workers. More flexible retirement should not result in lower standards of social protection. It should also be borne in mind, that, according to social surveys, many elderly people do not in fact want to work longer but rather to make use of the "third age" for other activities in family, leisure or voluntary work. Any deregulation of retirement age also needs to take account of the current situation in the labour market. It is not desirable that elderly people should have to work longer while young people remain unemployed.

Lastly, the ongoing tendency of big companies, and even in some countries of government bodies, to send elderly people into early retirement irrespective of their personal capacities and options should no longer be supported by Member States.

Care and Support

Christian Churches in Europe consider that both individuals and societies should treat fragile elderly people with special care., Elderly and very elderly people are a rapidly growing group in society, so that imaginative new approaches to social and health care are going to be required..

New Ways of Caring

The elderly will need care, but their needs for care will be very variable in nature, e.g. help for daily life, providing possibilities for active leisure, temporary care after leaving hospital, day-hospitals, short-time care homes, respite care to relieve family carers, etc. This will need continuous development in infrastructures as well as the enhancement of human resources through better vocational training and the development of new professions. The EU's programmes for quality assurance and development in vocational education and training (the Copenhagen Process) and for a common framework in higher education (the Bologna Process) should contribute to building higher standards in the caring professions.

Old age should not be seen exclusively as a process of decline. Because ageing is not only a biological, but also a psychological and cultural process, it can have positive growth elements, too. It is the task of all actors in a society to support these positive aspects of aging so as to arrive at a new culture of living together in an aging society.

Social Services

Churches and diaconal organisations have accumulated centuries of experience in providing social services. They started developing and providing services in response to the needs of society long before the development of the welfare state. In all European countries, churches and church-related agencies provide care facilities for elderly people. The way in which this is done today depends upon the legal framework prevailing within each Member State for welfare organisations in general as well as for churches and diaconal organisations. Close cooperation between public authorities and civil society service providers of always contributes to a high quality of care services.

Solidarity between Generations

If European societies want to overcome the demographic challenges in their societies, they need to develop a new culture of solidarity between the generations. While churches in Europe recognise the importance of enhancing EU efforts in the fields of the economy and employment, the importance of overall coherence of EU policies must be stressed even more. A new effort has to be made on the basis of values truly integrating ethical, social and economic dimensions. CEC member churches will therefore support political efforts to integrate concerns related to sustainability into all policies and actions of the EU.

Benefit from Experience and Wisdom

Churches in Europe are critical of those contemporary trends which value people primarily for their youth, attractiveness, health, economic productivity and independence. In the end, solidarity between the generations means fair participation and equal opportunities for the different generations. Justice between generations makes it necessary to recognise the potential of every generation, to strengthen it and to bring them together. As already mentioned, sustainable pension systems and fair sharing of the costs of health care are key elements of solidarity between generations.

Older people have many ways of contributing to the life of their families, communities, and the wider society. Those who are able to do so very often give support to their children and grandchildren, or to other younger people or to charities. This may include financial support or providing services which help to ease the stress of daily life and work, for instance helping young parents to integrate work and family life better.

Encouraging means Meeting with Respect

The experience and wisdom of the elderly, which they have accumulated and learned throughout their lives, is a treasure whose value is often underestimated or not recognised at all, but which is nonetheless of great benefit to society as a whole. Encouraging elderly people to use their specific capacities is a way of showing them deep respect. It is important that younger generations encourage the elderly to play an active role. Because they have lived longer, older people can help create and maintain a sense of belonging, of feeling at home somewhere in time and space.

Intergenerational Housing

The concept of intergenerational housing should be further developed and much more widely implemented. Intergenerational housing fosters interaction of social programmes that engage and support all age groups so as to improve the life of children, young people and older adults. Shared activities have been shown to improve mental and physical health and to enhance people's socialisation, improve their self-worth, increase personal independence and improve attitudes towards other generations. They help children develop enhanced social skills, lower levels of aggression, decreased drug use, increased stability and improved academic performance. Intergenerational housing schemes provide shared social service programmes that encourage interaction between the generations as well as providing separate facilities for the different age groups. Housing of this type provides a forum in which different generations can work together to find common ground and to explore the values of each generation.

7. Conclusion

The standard for all our actions is human dignity, which is the basis of human rights, Christians see every human person as being made in "God's image", which gives inalienable dignity to each person irrespective of sex, race or age. Churches in Europe believe the family to be a basic human community through which people are nurtured and sustained in mutual love, responsibility, respect and fidelity. In this light, families can be seen as schools of humanity. They teach people to recognise their own limitations and weaknesses and to tolerate those of others.

Society needs people who have grown up in a protected environment and been wisely brought up. Children and adults need the family as a place where they can learn how to behave in society and where helpfulness and absolute reliability are experienced. If they are to undertake all their tasks and bear all their responsibilities, families need not only individual members who are strong and resilient but also a supportive social environment.