

# Faith & Policy Watch

March 2011



## Bye Buy Childhood

Last month the Government launched a public consultation on the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood, as part of the Bailey Review. The consultation is seeking the views of parents and carers, on one response form, and of industry and other stakeholders, in another. The consultation focuses on:

- The sexualised imagery that forms the 'wallpaper' to children's lives
- The products that parents feel are inappropriate for children
- The way children are sometimes treated as consumers rather than children
- Marketing techniques associated with digital media
- Complaints procedures to advertisers, broadcasters and retailers



This consultation is your opportunity to let the Government know your feelings about the commercialisation of childhood. To take part in the consultation and inform Reg Bailey's recommendations you can either print off and fill in a paper form, or complete the consultation online at [www.education.gov.uk/consultations/index.cfm](http://www.education.gov.uk/consultations/index.cfm) (go to parents and carers version) by Friday 18<sup>th</sup> March. We would be delighted to hear if you have participated (although we don't need a copy of your response).

This month, Mothers' Union is also presenting over 18,000 signatures to Downing Street, calling on the Government to tackle the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood. Well done Mothers' Union members for all your hard work collecting the signatures for the petition!

## Marriage

Two important announcements were made last month in relation to marriage. First, the Government have proposed allowing religious buildings to host civil partnership registrations, under the Equality Act. The change will be entirely voluntary and will **not** force any religious group to host civil partnership registrations if they do not wish to do so. The change would apply to England and Wales only and will need further legislation - the Government Equalities Office will launch a formal consultation on this later in the spring. The Government will also be consulting on a move towards equal civil marriage and partnerships.

Second, under the Welfare Reform Bill, the Government is proposing to bring benefits payments to married or cohabiting individuals into line with those payable to single people. From 2013 the new 'universal credit' will give married/cohabiting benefits claimants nearly £10 per week extra.

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## Marital agreements Consultation

Amongst all the rumours of what is happening to marriage and civil partnerships, it may be easy to overlook the Law Commission's consultation on marital agreements. It is asking the public's views on a range of potential options for reforming the law of pre-nuptial, post-nuptial and separation agreements - contracts made by couples before or during their marriage or civil partnership that are intended to govern their financial arrangements if the relationship ends.

We have all read stories of rich people making marital agreements to protect their assets and of long expensive court cases with wealthy people arguing over vast sums of money and perhaps thought that such agreements do not apply to most people. However, the financial and property disputes between couples that do divorce who do not have much money can lead to much distress and expense for them. Additionally, an increasing number of people are marrying later in life when they might have accumulated financial assets such as houses or savings and want their children to benefit when they die or if they divorce. Therefore, making some sort of marital agreement either before or during marriage can seem a good option for more than just the wealthy.

The vows contained within the Anglican rite of marriage are based on intent; a promise for the future and on the voluntary consent of both man and woman to share all that they have until death. Although this cultural and historical expectation about marriage is not necessarily articulated in other religious or secular ceremonies, most people still understand marriage in this way. Because of this commitment to each other (even if it does not work out in practice) each of the couple is able to take risks such as giving up work to have children, looking after elderly dependents, supporting one partner who goes back to college or supporting each other if one should fall sick. The Matrimonial Causes Act is a response by society to provide some sort of justice where couples have shared and regretfully it has not worked out. However in a way, marital agreements are designed to circumvent or to override the MCA.

So if a couple wants to make an agreement about a possible dissolution of their marriage, what are they saying about wanting to make a lifelong commitment to their partner? In particular the sharing of money, property or other items is a central expression of this commitment until death. Without such unconditional sharing and expectations of lifelong marriage (even if it does not work out in practice) is not the very idea of marital commitment seriously weakened? Does this matter?



If marital agreements became legal and binding, does it make one partner vulnerable? For example, what happens if a couple in their 50s agree when marrying, that the house they live in is to go to one of the children on death of that parent or divorce, and 20 years later the parent dies and the children demand the house. What happens to the elderly partner still alive?

The Law Commission's consultation is open until April. For further details go to [www.lawcom.gov.uk/marital\\_property.htm](http://www.lawcom.gov.uk/marital_property.htm)

*Sue Burridge, Policy Adviser, MPA Division, Church of England.*

## Child poverty

In this age of austerity, has the target of eliminating child poverty by 2020, confidently announced by the previous Government, been quietly forgotten - or at least been reshaped? As yet another consultation on child poverty closed in February and with the Child Poverty Act 2010, pushed through in the dying days of the last Government, still not implemented, have we got any further in reducing the effects of poverty on the 3.8 million children living under the poverty line? Half of these children in poverty live in households where at least one adult member is working.



We live in an extremely challenging economic climate, particularly with regard to public expenditure. But in such an economic climate it is particularly important to focus on the needs of families with children. The cumulative effect of the cuts in social benefits and services on the income of families with children is therefore a matter of great concern. The cuts will not help the Government in its stated aim of tackling child poverty. For example, expectant parents, families with small babies, families with parents in part time employment and large families on low incomes will bear the brunt of the tax and benefit reforms.

Families with small babies will be affected by the loss of the Child Trust Fund, the abolition of the Health in Pregnancy Grant, restrictions on the Sure Start Maternity Grant and the abolition of the baby element of Child Tax Credits. As the Family and Parenting Institute points out, this amounts to a total loss of £775.3 million to the families of 790,000 babies born each year. These families will also be affected by the three year freeze on child benefit, which for a family with two children is equivalent to £73 per annum in 2011-12 rising to £192.32 pa in 2013-14. Such a loss is particularly hard for those on low incomes.

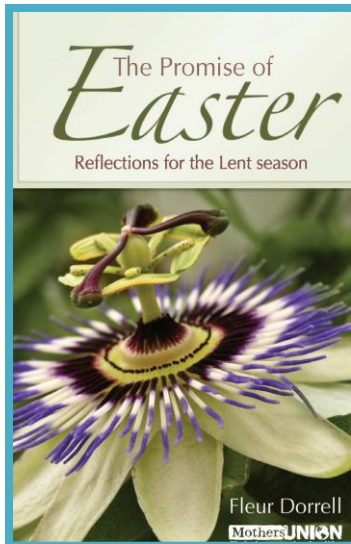
Reports by Frank Field and Graham Allen, also published recently, argue that child poverty cannot be eliminated by just raising the income level of households with children in them. They argue that more important to the life chances of children is the quality of the parenting, of the adult relationships in the family and the opportunities given to children in education, particularly in the early years. Frank Field argues that each Government should be looking to the evidence to see where public expenditure should be spent instead of automatically raising child benefits and child tax credits.

At my interview for my post as Policy Adviser in 2000, I was asked the question 'If you were Chancellor of the Exchequer would you raise child benefit or increase married couples' allowance?' It is incredible that the same type of policy issues are still being debated today and that, even in the last 10 years with increased investment in family support, childhood inequalities have still risen, with the gap between richer children and children in poverty increasing; and children more likely to be poor than adults.

There is a strong argument for reducing public expenditure. But it will not be helpful if the cuts made now lead to avoidable increased calls on public expenditure in the future - which will certainly be the case if more children in more families begin their lives in poverty with diminished life chances. Such a policy simply increases the burden and passes it on to future generations of children. We must continue to try and crack the problem of child poverty.

*Sue Burridge*

## The Promise of Easter



Lent is not a time of waiting so much as accompanying. During Lent we are accompanying Christ in a unique way; on a journey that will lead to his death entirely for our sake, bringing God's humanity in touch with our humanity. Although we are spared all of his agony, it is a time for us to pause and reflect, to pray and above all, stay very close to Jesus. On this journey towards wholeness and salvation through Christ, we are given plenty of opportunities to understand his loving purpose. By reading the Bible each day during Lent and drawing on texts from both the Old and the New Testaments, we are shown a spiritual map. This map can deepen our faith and give us new insights into the most remarkable events of all time. This map leads us to Christ but at the same time the journey is far from easy; it is a lifetime's work involving pain and sorrow but also joy and infinite love. So we must not despair, we must not give up when it seems impossible because without our own inevitable crosses we cannot imagine Christ's greater suffering.

We are not alone, we are not abandoned forever. Glory will come at the end. And although we cannot really comprehend Christ's resurrection we firmly believe in its power. Christ conquered death and rose to new life. Easter gives us hope to bring this new life into our hearts.

... So may this Lenten season ground us in reality - reality that acknowledges humanity, its mess and violence, ambition and greed, power and death, yet also contains an understanding of divine beauty, peace, love and truth. A reality that stretches way back to our ancestors and the stirrings of creation, that gives us generous glimpses of the extraordinary and new ways that God works to open the doors to our souls. A reality that always leads us to Christ.

God's message is for all time, not just Lent, yet during this season we are called in a special way to follow him, to take up our cross, to enter into the mysteries of the Passion and the mind of Christ. Most of all, we are asked to show the world pure love.

It was out of love that God gave us his only son;  
it was out of love that Christ laid down his life for us;  
it was out of love that Christ called us to him;  
it was out of love that Jesus came quietly from the tomb.  
Jesus *is* this love.

*Taken from:*

*The Promise of Easter: 30 reflections for the season of Lent by Fleur Dorrell  
£4.99 and available through MUE.*

## European Union internet safety campaign

Despite millions of Euros being spent on promoting internet safety for children, only 14% of parents across Europe have installed web filtering software to prevent their children from seeing certain websites. The survey carried out by London School of Economics also found that 40% of parents did realise that their child had seen sexual images online, while over half of parents did not know that their child had received hurtful or abusive messages online. The European Union is pushing ahead with legislative initiatives over the next year to make the internet safer for children and address data collection practice and behavioural advertising.