

HOW CAN FAITH COMMUNITIES HELP PREVENT CHILD ABUSE?

Speech to the [Wellington Council of Christians and Jews](#), 7th November, 2007

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[Note: You can hear the original audio at: <http://ccj.blogs.thinktank.co.nz/files/2009/01/20071107-lesley-max-child-abuse.mp3>]

When you raise four children and a husband, you learn to talk quite loud. So am I audible to everybody? Good.

Well, ladies and gentlemen of the clergy, and Mr Chairman and ladies and gentlemen one and all, it's a real pleasure for me to be here tonight at the Wellington Council of Christians and Jews, because I'm a founder member of the Auckland Council and it's one of my significant and very much enjoyed activities.

I'll just show what the Pacific Foundation changed to. It was the Pacific Foundation, but it is now " drum roll " it's now Great Potentials. We changed our name, we changed our identity because we wanted to stress the potential we saw developing in the people that we were working with, and it's one of the most exciting things in my life. So there we are, Great Potentials, helping children, young people and families to flourish.

Look, with this title tonight, How can Faith Communities Help Prevent Child Abuse? I think I've been presented with quite a tall order in speaking for how faith communities - in the plural - can help prevent child abuse. Obviously, the only faith community I know from the inside is the Jewish one. However, I'll aim for a pluralist approach here based on the following dubious credentials.

I was born into a Jewish family and community, but I went to primary school to a nominally Anglican school, St Anne's on Takapuna Beach. I think I had a certain confusion in my earliest years there, because I remember skipping down my path one weekend with a friend from St Anne's on either side of me. One of them said, You're a Roman Catholic, aren't you? I thought for a moment. I was put on the spot. I knew that probably I was somehow

different in some way and I supposed that this was it, so I agreed and we skipped on. Amazingly - amazingly Anne Beaglehole had exactly the same experience. She recounted it in one of her books. Anyway, I did overcome my identity confusion pretty soon.

So I'm a product of a Jewish upbringing in an overwhelmingly Christian wider environment. I went, as I said, to these schools, and at both my primary school and my secular secondary school we sang hymns at assembly and listened to readings from both Testaments. I think that we're all here steeped in the Western European Judaeo-Christian literary and cultural tradition. More recently I'm slowly developing some understanding of elements of Islam, many of which strike me as very familiar as a Jew.

So how can faith communities help prevent child abuse? Well, both Judaism and Christianity have a mission, the mission of social justice, the mission of *tikkun olam* or healing the world, and the plurality of the Christian social services are testament to that. Our social services tend to be a little less well known; they nevertheless exist.

Faith communities can make it their business to understand the scale of abuse in this country, a shameful scale. I can best put it in context by saying that New Zealand rates worst among OECD nations on the measure of children killed through accident and injury. We are among the worst grouping in terms of teenage births, we have high rates of family violence, and we have the biggest gap between our successful learners and our unsuccessful learners of any country in the OECD.

As well as outright abuse, we have a high rate of maltreatment by way of neglect of children. Neglect of their physical, emotional, mental, social and developmental needs. That is reflected in our high rate of usage of alcohol and drugs among young people, which can be a disaster for those young people but may be a catastrophe for their children.

The conclusion is inescapable that we have a crisis relating to the quality of parenting and family life in this otherwise blessed land. My view is that we need to revisit the notion of family and clarify the roles. Some countries overseas, particularly in Northern Europe, make explicit statements about the responsibilities of parents in their legislation. I believe we should do the same here; it needs spelling out.

I'm chairman of the New Zealand Parenting Council. I raised this issue at our last meeting. The person who agreed with it most forcefully was our Maori member who works in a troubled community in the north. She says there's

such a need for a plain language statement that spells out the responsibilities and rights of parents. They're asking for it. We have to see again that parents are people who protect, provide and nurture, whatever the circumstances.

We can take to heart a number of Biblical statements. You know, I think that our monotheistic faiths were founded in revulsion against the abominations which used to include the abuse of children; sacrifices; their use in ritual. That is the very foundation of our faiths. We are told again and again and again to care for the stranger, the widow and the orphan. In the Gospel of Mark we have the statement, Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for such is the Kingdom of God. It annoys me that that term suffer the little children is forever used wrongly by ignorant sub-editors in newspapers who think it is a statement about children's suffering rather than permit the children to come unto me.

We have the Prophet Ovadia (Obadiah) urging us to turn the hearts of the fathers unto the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers. I think we need to look at what this means in the modern context.

Firstly, the notion that children should have a father. I hope we're far enough away from the sixties and seventies that we can again see the benefit of fathers. I believe that we can do a great deal to help fathers bond with their children, and in fact we need to encourage both mother to bond and father to bond, both, and I don't believe that the lead maternity carer has completed her job or his job until that process has begun.

I had to take my car to get a warrant of fitness the other day. There was a father and a baby also waiting, and he had to wait for quite a long time. It was such a pleasure to see this father with his baby, just holding the baby, reading, absent-mindedly kissing its head, attentive to it, responsive to it, you know, a lovely new age father, and we want so many more of them.

Let me give you a specific example from our work of turning the hearts of the fathers into the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers. We have a family service centre in South Auckland, and the people who use it have multiple problems many of them. We have a wonderful manager, Louise Belcher, and she is gifted in helping do just this. She works with many parents who have their children removed from them. Quite famously I quoted - it was reported in 'North and South' - the most amazing statistic. She had eight parents sitting in front of her on one occasion; between them they had 54 children of whom 39 were in out-of-family care - scattered to the four winds. And many of these parents want to get their children back; they have to demonstrate that they're safe. And she worked with one man, she gave him suggestions about what he could do, and he reported back to her - this is

verbatim - I just feel so good and so happy to know that my boy loves me. I usually yell at him, never listen. We listened to each other for the first time; we both cried. That was this non-custodial father after visiting his son following attending the parenting course. So I think that is a demonstration of the prophetic principle.

We need to hold fast against cruelty to children. The Biblical prophets rail against cruelty. We have the statement in Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers from Rabbi Shimon HaTzaddik, the righteous one. He said, Al shlosa devarim ha olam omed: al haTorah, v'al haAvodah, v'al gemilut haChassadim. Upon three things the world stands, on the Torah, on worship and on acts of kindness. I think we say too little about kindness. I note that kindness is not one of the values to be emphasised in the new curriculum for schools; I wish it were.

We have from the Gospel of Matthew the words of Jesus, that he who hurts a child it is better that he should have a millstone around his neck and be drowned. But cruelty to children through acts of commission and acts of omission are everywhere. Reading the monthly reports from our Family Service Centre, one of the very few in New Zealand, provides a picture of such suffering, and it's inter-generational suffering. Our brilliant staff do everything that they possibly can to ameliorate that suffering, but it's being freshly generated every day.

I think faith communities need to find the courage " I hope I'm not offending anyone here " to talk about what has become the unspoken and the unspeakable. I think we need to advocate for the notion of planned families, so that already overwhelmed women do not have pregnancy after pregnancy which deplete them physically and emotionally, where there is no stability for the new baby or the already existing children, and very little nurture. Now, I'm aware that there are, I believe in both Catholic and in Jewish circles, ways of planning for families which are acceptable to each. I stand to be corrected, but I believe that to be the case.

I was taken by the rabbinical admonition in Talmud Yerushalmi that a person must not acquire a domestic animal or bird unless he has arranged for it to have suitable food. I think my point is made.

I believe as faith communities we should hold fast against the degradation of the popular culture. It's very hard to do that without being ridiculed by the media. Think of the influences on you, what you in your growing years heard and read and saw. For me, one of the greatest influences was 'Little Women'. It encouraged in its readers a notion of self-sacrifice, self-control, love of family, service to others. And running through it is the Christian metaphor of the pilgrims' progress, and I think it's a very powerful work. I must say that I do wish when I asked my little grandchild in Melbourne what he's reading these days - because he's a keen reader " that it wasn't one volume after

another (and I believe there are 154 in all) of 'Captain Underpants'. So if anyone's got a better suggestion I'd love to hear it. He's seven.

Let me talk from what's familiar to me. The Jewish community is very under-represented in child abuse; that's simply a fact. Some may say, yes, but the Jewish community tends to be quite well off. The fact of the matter is that there is quite a wide range of income level in our community, and there are many, many people who struggle economically. Most, however, are reasonably comfortable. On the whole our community employment tends to be in business, in the professions, or in skilled trades. Now, what can we learn from this low rate of child abuse? What might have acted through the generations as some kind of safeguard? I have some hypotheses.

I think perhaps the status of women in marriage. You know, the marriage contract which the husband signs, is a very serious matter; the provision that he has to make for his wife. Rabbinical teachings over the millennia on the whole encourage sensitivity to one's wife. There were the occasional misogynists who warned against being in the company of women and listening to women etc, but on the whole the tenor of it is to encourage sensitivity to one's wife. I think I've repeated occasionally to my husband the rabbinical admonition that a man shouldn't cause his wife to shed tears, because women are tender hearted; they are close to God.

Pretty much there's an egalitarian ethos within the family, and I think perhaps the most potent symbol of this status of women in the Jewish home is the recitation on Friday night at the Shabbat table of Eshet Chayil, Woman of Valour; it's wonderful. And, again, we share it. Of course most of it's drawn from Proverbs " (Mishlei).

Also in the Jewish faith is the pre-eminence of the family, in our faith, in our life, in our civilisation, and in practice. I think it's very interesting that despite a history of loss, of dispossession, Jewish families have remained agencies of nurture. One of my colleagues has often remarked about the fact that in New York in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century, in the midst of utter poverty, somehow the Jewish families - and not only the Jewish families - but the Jewish families did manage to transfer to their children values and capacities which served them well as they acculturated to the new world.

I have a thesis; I'd love to write a book one day, I don't know when. But looking at the post-Holocaust era, my view is that when one has been much loved as an infant and a child, one may somehow be inoculated against the worst effects of great loss. This book I have yet to research and write, but I know many of the people who for me are living exemplars of that in our community in Auckland. We're now able to see " I know the survivors - some of them

survivors of Auschwitz and other camps - I know their children - and now a new generation has been born. And without exception, despite the nightmares that the original people must have brought with them and lived through, somehow the families have been sound. And I think that that is extraordinarily interesting.

But also, we have the value of learning in the Jewish world; the value of education. The role of the family in that, of both mother and father, in the Birkat Hamazon, the Grace After Meals, we thank ~ my father my teacher, my mother my teacher'. And I think the juxtaposition of teacher with parent is an important thing.

There's a Yiddish saying, Where children are studying, there dwells the divine presence. We're told the education of the children should not be interrupted, even for the rebuilding of the Temple. We're told a mother should introduce her child to the study of the Torah. A father should ensure that his son learns Torah, a trade, and how to swim. A father who neglects to teach his child a trade or a profession is seen as one who encourages him to rob. I think the Christian members of the audience here must find that somehow familiar, in that it seems clear that Jesus was an avid student of Torah and learned the trade of carpentry. As to swimming, perhaps he had a better technique! But parents are teachers, consciously so, and we'll come back to that theme.

Everywhere in our shared scriptures are metaphors of the family. God is represented variously as a father, a husband, and as a nurturing mother. One of those Haftarahs of consolation of Isaiah expresses it beautifully. Isaiah uses the mother/child metaphor to illustrate God's faithfulness, consolation, peace and joy. That ye may suck and be satisfied with the breast of her consolations, that ye may drink deeply with delight of the abundance of her glory. Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river and the wealth of nations like an overflowing stream, and ye shall suck thereof. Ye shall be born upon the side and shall be dangled upon the knees. As one whom his mother comforted so will I comfort you. Both the Jewish and Christian faiths - traditions - are embedded in the family.

In both Judaism and Christianity the family is central; a central metaphor. In Christianity the metaphor - the symbol - of mother, father and baby. In all the thousands and thousands of religious paintings, what we see is tenderness of mother for baby. You know, as I said, I used to go to St Anne's School and we would be taken along at Christmastime to St Peter's Anglican Church and there would be this crÃ"che scene, you know, the manger and the baby and so forth, and I envied that. It was the only time that I had a yearning. I envied that because I could understand it, it was tangible.

Now, isn't it interesting and ironic that the word crÃ"che is now used not to signify a baby loved and protected by

his parents, close by his mother, but a place where infants are cared for by strangers? Rabbi Hillel said, 'That which is distasteful to you, do not do unto others; that is the law, the rest is commentary'. I think we could interpret that to mean, 'That which you would hate for your child, try not to let it happen to others'. Conversely, that for which you are profoundly grateful in your life, work to make available to others. And I must say that that really sums up what I've been trying to do for the last 20 years. I hope it does not seem egocentric or ethnocentric; it's not supposed to, but I am so grateful for what I had.

Now, I'm not talking culture-specific here, I'm talking universal principles. Universal principles encompass the idea of children being born into stability, being protected and nurtured. Universal principles also encompass the idea of parents being the first and most significant educators of their children. I'm so grateful for my parents and my grandparents. My memories of life at home - the Shabbat, family time - it can be recreated, it doesn't have to be in a Jewish context.

Our wonderful Louise that I mentioned before does this fantastic thing of family visioning with her parents, and I want to clone this woman, she's so good.

We can ensure that families have meaningful ceremonies, whether it's birthday, Passover, Christmas.

So what can we do practically as faith communities to reassert the centrality of family, parents' role to protect, provide, nurture, educate and guide? Well, I've got ten brief suggestions.

1. I found a fellow thinker in one of Cindy's key staff at the Commissioner for Children's Office. He, like me, is adamant that the promotion of the quality of tenderness in parents is very important. He's thinking particularly of fathers, and I'd love to work with him and Cindy on some kind of a campaign. I think, as I said before (this is still point number 1) we can do this parent coaching, so we're coaching attachment, we're coaching bonding.
2. Secondly, we can see parents as their children's teacher most practically, and I'll show you some pictures about that when I finish. About the HIPPY Programme, the Home Interaction Programme for Parents and Youngsters, which provides additive cultural capital. And also, we need to recognise that by lifting the educational level of the child and the parent you're raising health status and wellbeing. The most effective way

- to raise health status is to raise educational level. Now I know that President Clinton is probably not the poster boy for all the conjugal values, but nevertheless let me cite him as saying he believes that we can give. And, Kate, I don't know if you've got his new book Giving about philanthropy; it's wonderful. He says we can give time, we can give money, and we can give skills. And he sees HIPPY as a prime example of giving skills and achieving inter-generational change.
3. I believe we need to press for the explicit statement of parental responsibility; trigger more conscious discussion about it.
4. Acts of kindness - directly or indirectly. I know that there are people here representing those wonderful Christian social service agencies without which this country would be so much the poorer and the uglier. The Jewish view tends to be that we have an obligation for the welfare of others, but not so much for the state of their soul. But I'm aware of some wonderful effects for people in the depths when they've been able to find a faith through Christian outreach; wonderful, wonderful examples of lives remade.
5. Acts of generosity. You know, we have the term in the Jewish world of Tzedakah, which means both charity and righteousness. We're told to give at least a tithe - a tenth - that's a minimum; a fifth is better. And of course in the Christian world the concept of tithing is very well known. In Islam the concept of Zakkat; again, so familiar to me.
6. I think we need to resist at all costs the abuse of children through teaching them to hate and to wish to kill.
7. Encourage youth groups. Well-led youth groups are a wonderful salvation for many and many a child. I've seen it in our community, young people who I've known to be at risk. Their salvation in many cases has come through youth groups, because they're at an age when their parents are not able to be what they might be to them.

8. I think we need to above all rethink the notion of family in the light of others' enduring what you would not wish for your children and grandchildren. I think that should be the test. Is this something you would wish for your children and grandchildren? Is this style of life, structure of family, something you would wish for your children and grandchildren? If you wouldn't wish it for your own, should we be enabling it, perhaps, as a nation?
 9. We need to support the proposals that our wonderful and brave Children's Commissioner brings forward. They are considered, they are workable, they do require courage on her part, because talkback land prefers to take the contrary view and even the demonising view, and that is very, very sad.
 10. But I think finally we don't accept others enduring what we would not wish for our children and grandchildren. That is my version of the golden rule which we share.
- Rabbi Hillel said, If I am not for myself who will be for me? If I am for myself alone what am I? And if not now, when? And I think that statement, Im lo achshav, e matai? -If not now, when? - is a call to urgent action. When that seems too difficult we remember the words of Rabbi Tarfon, also from Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers. It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.