

Separated families – a shameful situation

I want to tell you something about a shameful situation that exists in the UK today – a situation that is being ignored by Government but a situation that many have known about for years, a situation that is so bad that it may be hard to believe. But the facts are true and easily verified.

The situation concerns separated families and the rules set by Government to determine the child maintenance that should be paid by the parent who is not the main carer to the other parent. Unfortunately, fundamental mistakes were made in drawing up these rules. The result, for many parents, is that the calculated payments simply cannot be paid. They would be left without enough for their own survival.

Many of you will know of families where the parents no longer live together. It can be a difficult situation for all concerned – emotionally and financially. In many cases the parents are able to cooperate and make decisions together, in the best interests of their children – where the children should live, how much time they spend with each parent, how both parents can remain involved in the lives of their children, how to share the cost of bringing them up. But this is not always possible. If the parents can't agree on how to share the cost of the children, or want guidance, the parent with the main care of the children can apply to the Child Maintenance Service (previously the Child Support Agency). It will calculate how much the other parent should pay, according to a set of rules.

This is where things go wrong. Faulty legislation means that the amounts calculated are beyond the reach of many parents. The problem is particularly severe for those on low income since the two thresholds included in the rules to keep their payments affordable still have the values assigned to them in 1998! And no account is taken of the way in which maintenance payments interacts with welfare benefits. A crazy situation has resulted. As soon as a paying parent's income passes the lower threshold of £100 a week, they find that they lose money (up to 30p) for every extra £1 they earn. Parents in full-time work end up with less money than if they were unemployed.

The problems not only affect non-resident parents who live alone but also have a severe impact on the well-being of second families. If the paying parents complain they are told "That is what the law says, so you must pay." If they say they cannot pay, the payments are enforced, for

example by taking money direct from their wages or any bank account, or sending in bailiffs.

What is this to do with me? The situation was put in front of me early in 2011, through the case of a particular individual, and it was made clear that I was called to act. I have often felt inadequate and unequal to the task and know that by myself I can accomplish nothing. However, I am content to be a tool in God's hands and to trust the outcome to Him. Some steps on the way so far have included:

- A meeting with Maria Miller, the Minister then responsible, in June 2012.
- A Circuit Memorial to Conference in 2013 and subsequent Methodist Church letter to Government.
- Work with the Centre for Social Justice leading to exposure of the problems in their 2014 family breakdown report '*Fully Committed?*' They recommended urgent action.

So far nothing has changed – the problems remain. So I continue the task I have been given, taking each new step as it is put in front of me. I thank God for the privilege of being called to this particular service. I give thanks for His guidance over the past years, for the increase in my knowledge and understanding and for the faith I have been given to trust Him for what is to come.

Knowledge of the problems has now been given to you. Please share it and use it in any dealings you have with separated parents. Please also include the situation in your prayers, remembering:

- children and parents in separated families, that they may learn to work together
- parents faced with impossible payments, that they may be believed and given support
- those who know that payments are unaffordable, that they may be emboldened to speak out
- those who seek to get the situation acknowledged, that they may be guided and strengthened
- Government, that it may have the courage to act to put things right.

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For more information go to Caversham Heights website;

<http://www.cavhmc.org.uk/ch-sep-fam.htm>

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