

*Transcend 2005 - November*

# ***Transcend for Latter-day Saints***

***Edifying Latter-day Saint Elected Officials,  
Community Leaders, and Active Citizens***

## **All Talk, No Walk: Dissonance In LDS Family Politics**

**Part 1 of 2**

***Session Eight, November 2005***

**(Sutherland Note:** *The theme of the November session of the 2005 Transcend Series was “Education, Poverty, and Family: Understanding Policy Frameworks.” Third, and last, among the Intellect sessions this year, the November session was crafted to help elected officials and community leaders examine these three major policy areas to their deeper meanings and ramifications. Our overriding goal was to address these policies from their intellectual origins, but within a specific framework.*

*The breakfast keynote was delivered by Mr. Lloyd Pendelton, a leader in the Welfare Services Department of the LDS Church. Mr. Pendelton currently is on loan to the State of Utah as Director of the Utah Homeless Task Force. He drew upon his experience in the area of homelessness to address broader aspects of poverty.*

*The morning seminar was facilitated by the Superintendent Barry Newbold of the Jordan School District (the largest school district in Utah). Dr. Newbold led participants through a “Who’s on First?” discussion about exactly where educational power, authority, and control rests.*

*The afternoon workshop was led by Sutherland Institute President Paul T. Mero who addressed the question of “What is the fundamental unit of society?” Is it the individual, the family, the church, the corporation, or the state? Or some combination of them?*

*In each of these segments, the November 2005 session pushed participants to establish solid frameworks from which to discern the nuances and logic that determine the fate of our country’s most pressing issues. – Paul T. Mero, president, Sutherland Institute)*

# All Talk, No Walk: Dissonance In LDS Family Politics

## Part 1 of 2

*“We call upon responsible citizens and officers of government everywhere to promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.” – The Family: A Proclamation to the World, The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, September 23, 1995.*

There is a secular version of the LDS *Proclamation*. The first planning meeting for the second World Congress of Families gathering was held in Rome, Italy, for one week in May 1998. In attendance were 26 women and men from the six inhabited continents including adherents to the world’s great religions: Roman Catholics, Evangelical and Mainstream Protestants, Latter-day Saints, Eastern Orthodox, Jews, and Sunni and Shiite Muslims. The Latter-day Saints involved were Mary Ellen Smoot, then-General Relief Society President, Richard Wilkins,

a law professor at Brigham Young University, Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf, then-member of the First Quorum of the Seventy and official representative of the LDS Church at the meeting, and yours truly.

Meeting in a room dating from the first century before Christ, attendees spent one week hammering out a definition of the “natural family.” This was the result,

The natural family is a man and a woman bound in a lifelong covenant of marriage for the purposes of the continuation of the human species, the rearing of children, the regulation of sexuality, the provision of mutual support and protection, the creation of an altruistic domestic economy, and the maintenance of bonds between the generations.

This succinct, but in spots unfamiliar, language became the basis for many other meetings and several other public statements about the natural family in conjunction with the second World Congress of Families meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, in November 1999 – not the least of which was the wonderfully comprehensive *Geneva Declaration*, unanimously passed by the 1,600 delegates to the worldwide convention. (This document is at [http://www.worldcongress.org/WCF2/wcf2\\_declaration.htm](http://www.worldcongress.org/WCF2/wcf2_declaration.htm))

Whereas the LDS *Proclamation* uses the simple term “family” as the basis of its definition of family as the fundamental unit of society, the World Congress of Families planning committee preferred to use the term “natural family.” There were four compelling reasons for this qualified usage. First, the term signifies a natural order to family structures that is common across cultures, historic, and overwhelmingly self-evident. Second, the term signifies a wholly defensible expression. “Natural” is not “nuclear,” which would limit its scope, nor is it “traditional,” which would burden its utility in public discourse. It is what it is, a self-evident expression. Third, the term “natural” precludes incompatible constructs of the family as well as incompatible behaviors among its members. And fourth, “natural family” is a positive expression. It does not require a discussion of negative incompatibilities to define itself.

Then again, like the LDS *Proclamation*, the WCF definition is about families, not simply marriage, but families. More importantly, these definitions help us to understand the value and purposes of the natural family. These purposes are six.

First, we must have children if we are to continue the human race. This is an obvious but stark reality. Europe has forgotten this lesson and is now suffering the consequences of not reproducing itself in adequate numbers. Europe as we know it will soon disappear because of the culture of death, not life, which it began to embrace in the 1950s. In policy terms, this matter is also significant. Do we care about Social Security? Well, then, we need to procreate to give birth to the rising generations that will care for us in our old age. More people are good, not bad. Healthy nations and communities have children.

Second, the natural family is optimal for the rearing of children. Only in two-parent families do children have the best chance of living stable, healthy, and prosperous lives. That children in other family structures survive and even thrive now and then, they are the exceptions – though growing ever more prevalent as we consciously lower our expectations of parental success.

Third, the natural family exists to regulate sexuality. No one wants the state to regulate sexuality. Such standards must emanate from civil society, especially the family. The natural family is the best place to incubate and nurture private standards of sexuality and then allow those private standards to project outward naturally into public mores.

Fourth, the natural family is the best locus for support and mutual protection. Women and children are safer in natural, two-parent families than in any other family structure. Society is safer as well. Crime is lower. Dysfunction leading to crime is less threatening. This is why divorce is an enemy of productive society and should be entered into with great caution.

Fifth, the natural family is an ideal economic unit for many reasons, but perhaps its greatest virtue is that it cares for those in need. It cares for its own, those it loves, including those who cannot carry a normal burden in life. It lifts the feeble knees, it loves unconditionally. It truly represents an altruistic domestic economy.

And, sixth, the natural family is generational. It includes aunts and uncles, cousins, and grandparents. It relies on the experiences of ages. It reveres lessons learned and wisdom given. Its purposes include sealing intergenerational bonds.

Yes, the language of the WCF definition of the natural family might seem awkward in places but it is accurate and unquestionably obvious.

There is a reason to mention all of this. Let's fast forward to now, Utah in 2005.

The conservative, heavily Mormon community of the City of North Salt Lake recently considered a resolution, a “vision” statement of sorts, in support of the natural family. It was discussed and rejected soundly. Perhaps there was disagreement over the exact text, but in such councils legislative language is always malleable. There is simply no shading it – a community that would otherwise and unhesitatingly consider itself “pro-family” aggressively chose not to identify with the ideals of the natural family.

The language of the proposed resolution was in the spirit of the *Geneva Declaration* adopted six years earlier by an ecumenical audience at the second World Congress of Families. If examined closely, and with an eye to local relevance, the *Geneva Declaration* embodies the principles and values, if not some of the doctrine, of the LDS *Proclamation*. And yet the resolution was viewed by the City of North Salt Lake with disdain.

Why? Where was the disconnect? People who ostensibly support the LDS *Proclamation* soundly rejected similar secular language, siding with gay and

lesbian community advocates in attendance, saying such language was too narrow for their (again) overwhelmingly LDS community.

This dissonance is a grave problem that bodes ill for the family in public discourse and policy making. A “grave” problem because this dismissal of the resolution seems to have arisen from some very core sentiments about who we are privately as well as publicly.

For instance, what is it about the existence of imperfect families that seems to paralyze our abilities as responsible citizens to uphold ideal family structures – family structures clearly shown through eons of experience and mountains of empirical research to be the safest, healthiest, happiest, most prosperous life, not to mention the most beneficial social experience for the common good of society?

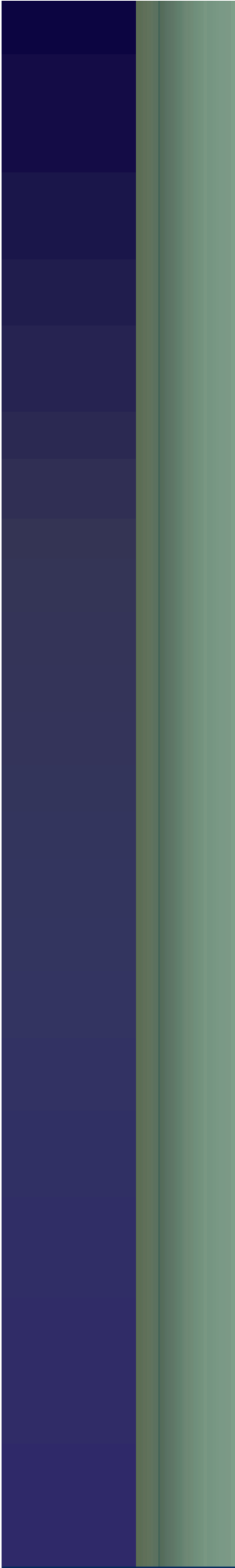
Clearly, there is a dissonance in most of our private lives between what we believe and how we live. No need to call it hypocrisy, just call it being human. Even so, amidst our conflicted psyches, we manage to persevere on a course set for our better selves. For instance, just because we sometimes lie does not mean that we endorse or even encourage lying. Or just because we may be alcohol- or drug-addicted doesn't mean we want others to be. We want to be our better selves and we want the same for others.

So what is it about a serious public discussion regarding families that turns these better sentiments on their heads? All of a sudden this same mindful patience and tolerance that we afford our own shortcomings, and our dutiful expectations for ourselves and others, seem to vanish into thin air. All of a sudden the less-than-ideal becomes our standard.

Define the family? You must be joking. What an insult! How judgmental! But what if defining the family, like defining traffic lanes, made our community a safer, more ordered, and inevitably freer, place to live? In fact, a driving analogy punctuates what should be obvious. Reasonable people can discern that placing both hands on the steering wheel and paying attention to the road is the safest and, indeed, the best way to drive. The reality is that many people don't do that. We drive with one hand on the wheel while talking on the cell phone, listening to the radio, reading billboards, etc. And so we have reckless driving laws. We get it – these sorts of good-driving expectations are universally accepted and appreciated.

But such careful attention to the family in public policy is not – even though the benefits that would accrue to accepting and appreciating the best kinds of family structures are the same as those associated with recognizing good driving environments. Yes, there are all sorts of family structures these days. But to say that one is better than the other is no more judgmental, in public policy terms, than it is to say that there is a best way to be an attentive and safe driver.

There is another element in play. By definition, public policy debates are public matters, not private ones, and these conversations require discernment, not



judgment, in serving the public interest. Too often we project our own personal and private family experiences on others. This projection is one of the great ironies of the modern era – while critics of family policy initiatives claim that each of us should mind our own business, they delight in the offensive and selfish intrusion of projecting the bad experiences of their lives onto others. You can almost hear the terse reprimand of a divorced parent counseling a young adult, “Now sweetie, you should really wait to get married. You don’t want to do it so young. Look what happened to me!” Misery loves company. Meanwhile, communities suffer from this prejudiced and selfish narrow-mindedness.

Neither do the “realities” of our lives justifiably supercede our constructive obligations to others. To acknowledge the reality that married couples get divorced is no justification, in and of itself, for divorced individuals to project their personal experiences on others by defending no-fault divorce laws. Likewise, to recognize that two men or two women live as if in marriage is no justification for legalizing homosexual marriages. And to say that single parents exist is no justification to ignore the private and public benefits of two-parent families.

What is it that makes family issues in the public policy arena so challenging? The answer seems to be that we cannot separate our less-than-perfect personal family experiences from our societal obligations to recognize healthy experiences and to appropriately acknowledge and encourage them when we see them. When it comes to public policy there are measurements and standards that create safer and better societies. To point them out is not judgmental. It is a public service. That goes for family policy as much as it does for the rules of safe driving. – PTM.