



# THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN JERUSALEM AND THE MIDDLE EAST DIOCESE OF CYPRUS AND THE GULF

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## EIGHTH DOHA CONFERENCE FOR INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Paper for first plenary session  
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Bishop Michael Lewis

### **The family: the heart of raising and sustaining the new generation**

Excellencies, eminences, distinguished colleagues, I am honoured to be asked to be one of the opening speakers at this eighth Doha Conference for Interfaith Dialogue. I am privileged to be a guest once again in the State of Qatar, which has been so creative, forward-looking, and hospitable in promoting intelligent discussion and sharing of perspectives between, in particular, the three great religions that derive from the faith of our father Avraham/Abraham/Ibrahim.

I shall speak briefly, and I shall speak of course as a Christian and specifically as an Anglican bishop, indeed the Anglican bishop serving this region. There are about 80 million Anglican Christians in 160 countries. Our church in this nation, is, like others, able to exist, flourish, and serve expatriate Christians because of the generous dedication of land by command of His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, Emir of Qatar, to whom we are profoundly grateful. Our expatriate Christians here come from many of the world's countries, both Western and Eastern.

The Anglican Communion, to use our official title, also describes itself, metaphorically but powerfully, as a *family* of Churches. The word family is therefore integral to our identity. Sometimes, like members of any human family, we have varying perspectives on matters great and small. Sometimes, like members of any human family, we would benefit from more internal dialogue. But overwhelmingly we are blessed by being, like every human family, bound together with bonds of descent, dynamic relationship, and deep affection. And above all else, like the human family when properly understood, we acknowledge that God is our great father and parent. We are not an autonomous unit. No individual, no group, no nation, no religion is absolutely autonomous, since all are part of God's creation, God's expression of himself. Radically, any use of the word "family", including that which describes the human family in society, must be subservient to the theological conviction that all human beings are called to know that they are sons and daughters of the same Heavenly Father. Radically, therefore, family is blessing, and family is vocation. Such a definition of family will save us from understandings of family that are too narrow, too exclusive, too triumphalistic, or too fearful.

In the great and poetic explanatory story of creation in holy scripture in the Book of Genesis, God's creation of men and women is accompanied by his blessing of them (Genesis 1:27-28). God also wills the continuation of his human creation through the generation of children, so that the resulting cascade of descendants may bring order to the world, the rest of the divine creation. All this, says scripture, was good in God's eyes. Family begins here. Here too also begin companionship and cooperation within family, since the variegation of the sexes is not just for mechanical reproduction:

“it is not good for the man to live alone; I will make him a companion”, says God (Genesis 2:18). Here too is the possibility of the development of cooperation into pleasure and delight in intimate, mutual, bonded coexistence.

Soon, sin creeps into human life, expressed in the disobedience of Adam and Eve and in the envious anger of Cain for his brother Abel. But, despite the consequences – alienation and wandering – God’s purposes for his creation family are not to be frustrated. The blessing still applies, even through the sin; the vocation – the calling – still summons the human family and human families to reclaim their true identity in God’s image and likeness.

As an observable feature of cultures and groupings down the ages it is possible to describe family, including marriage, as simply a very useful social institution, either explicitly or implicitly contractual: a building block of societies, a structure for the regulation and classification of relationships, for the transmission of bloodlines and inheritance, for the preservation of distinctive identities, for mutual protection and promotion. These and other functions, benignly understood, are indeed highly important, and when families begin to be threatened, or to suffer, internally or externally, to the point of dysfunction or dissolution, then the effect on societies can be serious. Much talking will doubtless be done at this conference on such sufferings, threats, and challenges.

But at the same time the concept of the human family has generally been held to possess a strong moral charge, beyond the merely functional, useful, or contractual. For example, both marriage and family have been associated at various times with the scriptural idea of covenant, deriving from covenants between God and human beings such as Noah, Abraham, and David. Two people marrying, therefore, are sometimes described as being called into a covenanted relationship with one another which is grounded in the spirituality of loving faithfulness. A family that results from such a union will also partake in such a spirituality, and it is in essence a spirituality of vocation, of calling, to a higher or deeper appreciation of what may seem only functional or descriptive. The notion of covenant needs to be applied carefully, since in scripture the highest covenants are unequal bonded relationships between God and a human being (including their descendants) in which God is unquestionably the senior partner, to be approached with adoration and awe. But any talk of covenant in connection with families most certainly raises the context of family Godwards.

For Christians, there will be further imperatives, and also some cautions, and I hope you will allow me, by way of a Christian contribution, to express them. Since Christians believe that in Jesus Christ is the full and perfect expression, within creation, of all that God is, in his love, his faithfulness, and his self-outpouring sacrificial love, they will long for every Christian relationship and every Christian family to display all that they can of Christ, so as to partake in all that they can of God. They believe that the Church is the Body of Christ, and that Christ is the Word – the living expressed presence – of God for all time. Therefore they will look to who and how Christ was and is in order to know how to live as individuals and as families. They will pray that it will be a reflection of Christ’s love, faithfulness, and self-outpouring sacrificial love that will characterise human and family life, triumphing over innate human sinfulness and failure, not so much by human effort as by participation in Christ’s paradoxical triumph on the cross. They will trust that such divine qualities are what not just Christians but all human beings may aspire to, to raise and sustain not just the new generation but all generations. Those who are not Christians will by no means express themselves in these terms, but it is important to see what in my view must motivate Christians when they set out to promote, safeguard, and explain family.

And they will be careful not to make an idol of the human family narrowly understood, but rather to recognise that God works out his purposes with his human family in a variety of ways. They will remember the selfishness, exclusivity, tyranny, domination, and exploitation that can sometimes mar the true nature of traditional families and indeed all human relationships, as well as the belligerence towards others that can result from an excess of group pride or a desire for group

prosperity at all costs. Christians will also recall that Jesus Christ himself was single and unmarried in the service of the Heavenly Father, and that, in the New Testament, he speaks to his natural mother from the cross and says to her “Take my closest disciple to be your son”, and to his closest disciple he says “She is your mother”, thus, in his greatest moment of love outpoured, widening the notion of family in the solidarity of love outpoured. For Christians, these things will be on their hearts to give even greater impetus to foster and deepen discourse about family.

And they will remember the passage in St Paul’s Letter to the Galatians (Galatians 3:26-29) in which St Paul points back to the family inheritance: “If you belong to Christ,” he says to Christians, “then you are the descendants of Abraham and will receive what God has promised.”

Whatever the differences between the great faiths assembled here, sincerely held, we can look within our family tree to Abraham, our human father in faith, who knew himself to be both blessed and called by God, and all his family with him. Acceptance, tolerance, and mutual respect will flourish most within a consciousness of such divine blessing and such divine calling. I pray that this solidarity in a huge and exceptionally significant Abrahamic inheritance will permeate our talking and thinking in the days ahead.

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