



Family Scholars Issue Call to Churches to Confront Spiritual Impact of Family Breakdown on Children

New Findings Reveal Children Raised in “Good” Divorces Far Less Likely to Be Religious Attenders, More Disinterested in Religion, Compared to Those Raised in Happy Marriages

Future Health of Churches, Scholars Say, Depends on Getting Ministries to Those From Non-Traditional Families Right

To interview the study co-investigators, press contacts are Matt Kaal or Alicia Savarese of the Institute for American Values, at mkaal@americanvalues.org or alicia@americanvalues.org, and telephone 212-246-3942.

Embargoed until 12:01 a.m. JANUARY 16, 2013

NEW YORK, Jan. 16, 2013

A new report from family scholars, based on thirteen commissioned papers from some of the nation’s top scholars on religion and family, reveals that amid decades of widespread divorce and family change America’s churches have given strikingly little attention to the experience of those who grow up without their married parents.

The report urges that, for the health of the churches and the sake of the next generation, faith leaders must do more. One-quarter of today’s young adults are grown children of divorce, and in recent decades rates of out-of-wedlock childbearing have skyrocketed. How these younger generations approach questions of moral and spiritual meaning—and what choices they make for themselves and their families with regard to religious identity and involvement—will influence broader trends in the churches.

Co-investigators of the report are Elizabeth Marquardt, director of the Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values and a nationally-known expert on the faith lives of children of divorce; Amy Zietlow, an affiliate scholar at the Institute for American Values and a regular contributor to *Atlantic* online and *Huffington Post*; and Charles E. Stokes, the Roy F. Bergengren Fellow in Thrift and Generosity at the Institute for American Values and a scholar in residence at Samford University. Commissioned project paper authors hold appointments at major research universities including Baylor University, Bowling Green State University, Clemson University, Notre Dame University, and University of Texas at Austin.

At consultations sponsored by the Institute for American Values in partnership with the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Chicago Divinity School, scholars examined and produced new analyses of data sets including the National Survey on the Moral and Spiritual Lives of Children of Divorce and the National Survey of Youth and Religion.



They report that when children of divorce reach adulthood, compared to those who grew up in intact families, they feel less religious on the whole and are less likely to be involved in the regular practice of a faith. Specifically:

- Two-thirds of young adults who grew up in married parent families, compared to just over half who grew up in divorced families, say they are very or fairly religious.

- More than a third of people from married parent families currently attend religious services almost every week, compared to just a quarter of people from divorced families.

The team of family scholars declare that today's grown children of divorce form a "broken leading edge" of the trend of more Americans considering themselves "spiritual but not religious." While grown children of divorce are more likely overall to have left the church, their role as leaders will be key in renewing the churches' ministry and welcome to those from non-traditional families.

Lead author Elizabeth Marquardt observes, "There are many reasons grown children of divorce appear overall to be less religious, including stories they tell of not feeling understood at church when their parents were splitting. But whatever the reasons, we now have a chance to draw upon their wisdom and get it right for the next generation."

Co-author Charles E. Stokes affirms, "This report helps fill in some important gaps in the complex portrait of what happens to children after parental divorce. Drawing upon the latest social-scientific evidence, it issues a clarion call to faith communities to pay closer attention to the needs of some of their most vulnerable members."

New findings reported in *Does the Shape of Families Shape Faith?* challenge the idea that teaching congregants how to have a "good divorce"—in which parents stay involved in the child's life and minimize their conflict with one another—offers much panacea. New data analyses reveal striking differences in religious experience when comparing those raised in good divorces with those raised in happy marriages. Researchers found:

- Those raised in happy marriages were more than twice as likely to attend religious services, compared to those raised in good divorces.

- Those raised in happy marriages were more likely to report an absence of negative experiences of God, compared to those raised in good divorces.

- Those raised in happy marriages have the lowest levels of religious disinterest, compared to those raised in good divorces.

- Those raised in happy marriages are more likely to report an absence of negative experiences of God, compared to those raised in good divorces.

The *Does the Shape of Families Shape Faith?* project was funded by the Lilly Endowment of Indianapolis, Indiana. The new report offers practical advice from co-author Amy Zietlow, an



ordained minister in the mainline Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. She says, “Pastors often struggle with how best to support children of divorce and the separated parents who love them. I can hand this report to any pastor, congregant, or concerned citizen and know that we have a place to start talking.”

The publication concludes with recommendations for pastors, youth ministers and youth sponsors, parents, children of divorce (young and grown), church members, and marriage ministries. It is available for free download at:

<http://www.centerformarriageandfamilies.org/shape-of-families/>.

About the authors:



Elizabeth Marquardt directs the Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values in New York City and is editor of FamilyScholars.org. She has written extensively on the inner lives of young people, including the ground-breaking book *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce* (Crown, 2005), and is principal investigator of the *Does the Shape of Families Shape Faith* project.



Amy Zietlow is affiliate scholar at the Institute for American Values, an ordained pastor in the mainline Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, and a contributor to *Huffington Post*, *The Atlantic* online, and FamilyScholars.org on faith, families, dance, and death and dying.



Charles E. Stokes is the Roy F. Bergengren Fellow in Thrift and Generosity at the Institute for American Values and a scholar in residence at Samford University. He holds a doctorate in sociology from the University of Texas at Austin.

About the Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values:

The Center for Marriage and Families is based at the Institute for American Values, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to strengthening families and civil society in the U.S. and the world. Directed by Elizabeth Marquardt, the center's mission is to increase the proportion of U.S. children growing up with their two married parents. At the Center's blog, FamilyScholars.org, contributors include emerging voices and senior scholars with distinctive expertise engaging today's key debates on the family.