



International Anglican Family Network

Promoting front-line Family Care throughout the Anglican Communion

Supporting the Campaign for Universal Birth Registration

Birth registration: A theological reflection on belonging and identity

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In Philippians 3.20, Paul writes of a heavenly citizenship. In 1 Peter 2.11, Peter writes about being an exile and alien to the world. Some have understood these passages, and others like them, to mean that we should not focus on the things of the earth, whose problems and issues are temporal and therefore fleeting in nature. Rather, our focus should be on the eternal, on our everlasting relationship with God our Father.

This would be an oversimplification. Elsewhere in the Bible we read of numerous references to the need to seek justice and promote equity. In Leviticus and Deuteronomy, for example, we are charged with the care of widows, orphans, the poor, and the aliens amongst us. In the famous passage in Micah, we are called to seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly before God. Indeed in the Lord's Prayer we ask that our Father's will be done here on earth as well as in heaven.

The thrust of God's message is one of inclusion. God's people are commanded to care for those that traditionally would have had no voice in society.

Inclusion means belonging to and being identified with God's community. Our understanding of this must thus prompt us to be concerned that the people in our earthly community are similarly connected so that they too have a feeling of belonging and sense of identity.

Which is why we should be concerned to ensure that everyone in our community has a birth registration. Upon registration, a person would normally be given a certificate or other form of document. That birth certificate or document says several things. It says who that person's parents are. It tells a person where s/he was born, and when. This information in turn gives that person a name and an identity, because that person will know who s/he is. It gives the person a status, because there is an official record that that person exists as a human being. That official record will go on to help determine a person's citizenship. It will confirm the place to which that person putatively belongs.

In Malaysia, just as in many other parts of the world, we face the problem of non-registration of children at birth. Parents or guardians come face to face with the consequences of this lack of registration when the time arrives to place these children in schools. Without a birth certificate, it is not possible to enrol into a school. While in Malaysia at least this issue is not so relevant when it comes to health care, it clearly does become a major concern in other countries.

Christian responsibility does not and should not stop there. It extends to working to ensure that this problem is not institutionalised by way of legislation or government policies in relation to birth registration, nationality and citizenship, and social programmes relating to healthcare and education. Or that, if it already is, then measures are taken to redress this problem and efforts undertaken to dismantle such barriers and obstacles to recognition, identity and belonging. This could, as has been done in Malaysia, lead to the establishment of mobile registration units that would go to remote areas, and greater awareness and education programmes. It could also involve the Church getting involved as a partner with government to address this issue. Each country will need to discover its own solution to the problem.

As the 18th century Irish statesman Edmund Burke once said, 'All that is necessary for evil to triumph is that good men do nothing.' Let us not allow this particular evil to triumph by our inaction. It is within our means to end this form of inequity and injustice.

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