

Briefing from Claire Borowik for the Family International

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The Family International was deeply saddened by the recent deaths of Ricky Rodriguez, son of Karen Zerby, co-administrative and spiritual overseer of The Family International, and Angela Smith, a member of the Family for over 30 years. Ricky (1975-2005) committed suicide January 8th, 2005, after taking Angela's life. The tragic circumstances surrounding their untimely deaths have brought much grief and heartbreak to Ricky and Angela's families and friends. (please see Ricky's memorial site at www.rickyrodriguez.com)

In response to the controversy this tragedy has generated in the media, second generation members of the Family have published a blog, in order to ensure that their voices may be heard. Over 400 young people raised in the Family have posted statements and testimonials with photos. (please see www.myconclusion.com)

Suicide and acts of violence are virtually unheard of in our communities. As Christians, we deplore and are diametrically opposed to acts of violence and the suffering these inflict on the innocent. We believe that human life is sacred, and each person should be respected as an individual created in the image of God. As Christians, our lives are devoted to sharing the news of God's love and salvation for humanity and caring for the needy. (For more information on our charitable activities in over a hundred countries, please see www.thefamily.org)

Ricky Rodriguez withdrew from the Family fellowship in 2000 in order to pursue his education and other interests. Although he departed on good terms, he later became estranged from his mother and sister. After contacting some of our more vitriolic apostates, he began to manifest violent tendencies. Those who were aware of his violent intents failed to report it to authorities or seek assistance.

In searching for a motive for this tragic crime, journalists should take care to not casually write off Angela's death and justify the actions of an obviously disturbed young man acting out his misplaced anger. Our society is rife with violence—regularly the public is exposed to violent crimes of individuals that act out the violence they witness via the media, and discuss anonymously via the internet. Such crimes are not particular to religious groups—in fact such violence is shocking and entirely unheard of in Family communities. (please see Angela Smith memorial site at www.angela-smith.org)

Second Generation Members Exiting the Movement

Members of the Family International exercise their right to raise their children in missionary communities, home-school and impart their religious beliefs to them, and include them in their mission outreach where appropriate. The Family acknowledges that young people raised in the Family should also be prepared by their parents to undertake a secular lifestyle, should they so choose. The Family's *Charter*, as well as several internal publications, advises parents to assume responsibility for assisting their children that depart from our fellowship through what can be a difficult transition from a close, nurturing, faith-based support system to an independent secular lifestyle.

The majority of young Family adults that have opted to pursue secular lifestyles and careers have integrated well and made a stable transition. A small minority of disaffected second generation

former members have vocalized grievances regarding aspects of their upbringing and stated their intent to bring about the dissolution of the Family International.

Official Apologies Tendered

Since 1993, the Family's administrative branch has issued seven official apologies to former and current Family members for any grievances regarding their experiences in the Family. Family leadership officially addressed therein any questionable past actions regarding discipline, education, or sexual misconduct that may have taken place. These apologies were published a number of times and have been a matter of public record for the past decade.

Family Policy for Protection of Minors

The Family International has a zero tolerance policy in regards to the abuse of minors. The Family will immediately expel and excommunicate any adult member deemed guilty of physically or sexually abusive behavior towards children. Family members are advised to conduct themselves in conformance with the laws of the jurisdiction in which they live and to cooperate with the justice system of the land.

Allegations of abuse are taken very seriously by Family leadership, who has the obligation under the Family's *Charter* to investigate such reports in a timely fashion and to take appropriate measures (*The Family Charter*, Procedures for Excommunicating Family Members). The *Charter* stipulates that the parents and the members of the community are responsible to provide a safe environment for all minors residing in their community. Parents are ultimately responsible for all decisions pertaining to the care and well-being of their children (*The Family Charter*, Rights of Children and Responsibilities of Parents).

The Family's policy for the protection of minors was adopted in 1986. We regret that prior to the adoption of this policy, cases occurred where minors were exposed to sexually inappropriate behavior between 1978 and 1986. This was addressed in 1986 when any sexual contact between an adult and minor was officially banned and, subsequently in 1988 declared an excommunicable offense. This policy has remained unchanged for nearly two decades, and the Family's *Charter* (first published in 1995), reaffirms this standard. All previously published literature underwent careful scrutiny to ensure that it reflected this position and questionable publications were officially renounced and expunged between the late 1980's and early 1990's. Any subsequent memorandums or informal discussions allegedly attributed to Family leadership which do not reflect this position are not official publications of the Family International and do not represent the Family's policy or theological stance on this issue.

In 1994, official acknowledgement was made of the responsibility David Berg bears in publishing writings that proclaimed a teaching of sexual liberty (in 1976 and 1978) without instituting safeguards for the protection of minors. This was officially corrected in 1986, when clear guidelines were instituted banning such contact and subsequently in 1988, when infractions of this policy were rendered an excommunicable offense.

The successful institutionalization of this policy is evidenced in the 600+ children of Family members that were subjected to government-enforced examinations in the early 1990's in several countries. These examinations confirmed the absence of physical, emotional, educational or

sexual abuse among children of Family members, resulting in the vindication of members by courts of law on three continents.

Conclusions of Justice Ward in British Custody Case

In 1995, after three years of studying former and current member testimony in a British custody case, Justice Ward issued a lengthy ruling, in which he leveled harsh criticisms of past eras of the Family's history, while also concluding that the Family had undergone numerous positive changes. In his closing remarks he stated that he was satisfied that the Family provided a safe environment for children raised within the group, and the court consequently awarded the mother, a member of the Family, care and control of her infant child. He stated,

The Family are and will remain a minority religious movement whose way of life will not appeal to the majority of the communities in which they live. Their children will live a different life. It is however in my judgement not a life beyond the pale. Within the limits of tolerance which make ours a free society Family life no longer presents such risks of harm... By harm I mean sexual abuse or any form of ill treatment or any impairment of health or intellectual, emotional, social or behavioral development, in the colour coding of harm. (W 42 1992 In the High Court of Justice Family Division Principal Registry in the Matter of ST (a minor) ND in the matter of the Supreme Court Act 1991)

Justice Ward also made note of the important role played by Maria (Karen Zerby), current administrative and spiritual leader of the Family, to ensure that children were protected from any form of abuse. He stated:

I am now totally satisfied that The Family, I would think at Maria's prompting, has since 1986 made determined and sustained efforts to stamp out child sexual abuse and to prevent any inappropriate contact between adults and children whether young children or teenage children. I have no evidence that child abuse is presently prevalent any more within The Family than outside of it. (ibid)

The Family International, formerly known as the Children of God, is a fellowship of Christian missionaries dedicated to preaching the Gospel around the world. Members have received Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and live and work together in small communities. Founded by David Brandt Berg (1919–1994) in Southern California during the late '60s, the Family has expanded into an international missionary fellowship located in over 100 countries around the world. Approximately two-thirds of The Family's full-time membership is comprised of second and third generation members. See www.thefamily.org