

# Family Matters – Pressing on Towards the Goal

**In the Winter 2000 edition of Caring, we printed an article about Family Matters Fostering agency. The article recounted how the dedicated people behind the original vision for the agency, with much prayer, blood, sweat and probably tears, saw it evolve and develop into a highly reputable fostering agency, known for its exemplary standards of practice and care for both foster-carer and child alike. I recently spent a day at the Family Matters offices to meet the people and catch up with what has been happening.**

Eleanor Meade is a remarkable woman. Co-founder of Family Matters with her husband Antony, she has overseen the growth and development of the fostering agency, though she is adamant that the agency would not be where it is today without the commitment of the team that work with her and for her. I have to agree that having met many of the Family Matter employees, it is obvious even to the most casual observer that they are dedicated professionals who have an extremely high regard for their work and their employers!

Eleanor was keen to point out that even with potentially contentious issues from a Christian perspective such as a child's perceived sexuality, it is still important to see the child as a whole. Whilst not condoning certain behaviours, the priority is to encourage the growth and development of that child within a loving and caring environment so they are able to become responsible adults, able to cope with life and its many challenges. Rejecting any child is clearly out of step with scripture, but doing so on the basis of what may be confusion over something like sexuality is completely erroneous. Eleanor reminded me of a quote from Philip Yancey's book, *Soul Survivor*, 'I've noticed Christians get very angry towards others who sin differently than they do', and this, in a way, says it all.

Family Matters also adopts a non-discriminatory attitude towards their foster carers. They consider both male and female applicants, single or with a partner, people from different ethnic backgrounds, religious faith or no faith at all. Even within the requirements of employment law, Eleanor is firmly of the opinion that what is most important is an individual's skill as a foster carer. She emphasised the importance that a child's well-being, background, ethnicity and religion whatever

It would be wrong to leave you with the Impression that Eleanor and Antony are merely astute business people. Eleanor is driven by a compassion for hurting and needy children, which belies a tenacious and, I believe, Godly determination to see things through, especially when life gets tough.

Since 2000, as well as continuing to run Family Matters with Antony and purchasing, and then moving to, a gorge in North Yorkshire, Eleanor had a serious skiing accident at the end of 2000 that required several weeks in hospital (and plaster). A few months later she was diagnosed with breast cancer for which she needed a radical mastectomy followed by, not initially successful, reconstructive surgery. Thankfully she has made a full recovery and is now surprisingly philosophical about her illness. Eleanor told me that in her darkest moments she remembered thinking 'this sucks', but she also knew that God loved her and that he would bring good out of the situation. True to character she commented that she had no option but to grit her teeth and keep going even though at the time it was awful.

Buoyed by the support of her family and her belief in a loving and faithful God, the fruit of that 'grit' can now be seen in a DVD and CD made and produced by Eleanor and Antony where she recounts her experiences with typical stoicism, drawing on the experiences of others, some in the public eye, who have either been affected by the illness or been able to offer a positive contribution to the breast cancer cause.

Historically, Antony had run the business side of the fostering agency and Eleanor took care of the day-to-day management. During Eleanor's illness, Antony and the Family Matters Social

might be, has to be respected. Although some foster carers are Christians, she mentioned a family who foster for Family Matters and who are also Buddhists. Eleanor described them as absolutely superb!

In the same vein, Eleanor considers it an insult to an omnipotent God when it is contested God can use only Christians to meet the emotional and developmental needs of a child. Having said this, the selection process for foster-carers is rigorous in order to maintain the standards of excellence that Family Matters works to and it is explained to any prospective carer at the outset that both Eleanor and Anthony are practising Christians and this underpins all their business activities.

This non-discriminatory approach also applies to those working in the Family Matters Headquarters in Folkestone. When I visited I met most of the team, amongst whom there were both practising Christians and others who didn't directly adhere to the Christian faith. It was clearly not a problem and the people I met were able to be quite open and honest about where they stood in terms of their beliefs. One person remarked that even though they didn't see themselves as overtly Christian, they really appreciated the times of prayer for the foster carers and children, led by other members of the team. They all spoke of how they had been made welcome, felt genuinely valued, and that there was an extremely supportive work environment that was extended to them and the foster carers.

Work Manager continued to run the agency until she was well enough to return, demonstrating that not only was the business sound and secure, but both Eleanor and Antony were acutely aware of being cared for and sustained by an all powerful and faithful God.

When I talked with Eleanor, she was emphatic that Family Matter's original core values are still very much intact and firmly based on sound biblical principles. Working from the starting point that all believers are called to be 'salt and light' in the world, one of the passages of scripture close to Eleanor's heart is Psalm 68 v 6 where it says 'God sets the lonely in families'. As far as Eleanor is concerned the service the fostering agency provides is a direct outworking of this promise.

On the basis that Jesus was totally non-discriminatory in his dealings with children; welcoming them and even rebuking the adults when they tried to stop them coming to him, Family Matters accepts children from All walks of life whose basic care needs, and difficulties often created exacerbated by circumstances outside their control, need to be attended to. Eleanor believes it is vital children are seen as a whole; unique individuals who are of intrinsic value in God's sight. This means that although there is always room for a fostered child to ask questions regarding life and faith, they are not seen as targets for conversion. Eleanor added that if a child in their care comes to faith there is obviously much rejoicing but this is not their primary concern.

At present the agency has 29 carer families, the majority of which are in South East England, but they also have a presence in the South West. Eleanor told me that because Family Matters has grown quickly but also very informally they have spent over a year focussing on consolidation and putting structures in place within the organisation to ensure expansion, efficiency and a continued high level of support to employees and foster carers alike

For 2005 Family Matters is seeking to recruit a substantial number of new foster carers and are currently undertaking a recruitment drive in the London area. Although this process takes some months from the expression of interest and initial attendance at a Family Matters presentation to acceptance as a foster carer, the priority will always be to provide a high quality service for the foster carer and child.

Towards the end of our conversation Eleanor quite pointedly said, 'Giving something away gives you so much more, but there's so little time and so much to do'. A passing remark was made to me by one of the Family Matters team; 'Eleanor is someone who knows what she wants and goes for it'. Judging by the Meade's exceptional track record coupled with their absolute trust in God, I am personally convinced that their desire to see the 'so much more' will, of necessity, come to pass.