

MEDIA RELEASE



Wednesday 25 July, 2007

News editors - Dr Smith is available for interviews. He is based in New Zealand (EST +2 hours) Please contact Sandra Kingston 0422 005 485 in the first instance.

Study finds unexpected views of masculinity in church-going men

Dads are the most influential person for sons as they grow up and move into manhood, men interviewed for a Deakin University PhD study said.

The study by Andrew Smith, who completed his PhD by distance education in New Zealand through Deakin University's Faculty of Education, looked at the influence of Christian spirituality on the development of the meaning of masculinity in adolescent males.

"Deakin responded positively to my proposal to look at three generations of church-going men and their perceptions of becoming a man," Dr Smith said.

"I really can't speak highly enough of the experience and the support that I had through Deakin in undertaking this research which presents some surprising, even unexpected findings about religious men and their views about men and masculinity.

"I work as a lecturer now but my background is as a counsellor," Dr Smith explained. "Over the years I have worked with a lot of men who had issues with identifying as a man. Church-going men seemed to have as many difficulties as other men working out what it meant to be a man."

Dr Smith said he had become intrigued about men and boys' thinking on the journey from boyhood to manhood. He also wanted to know whether the church, their faith or spirituality had an impact on that process.

While the study found that the church had very little conscious influence in the lives of the young men, Dr Smith found fathers did.

"Even in situations where the relationship between the father and son was not that strong, the son said their dad was the most significant person in their growing up," Dr Smith said.

"While they were involved in the church, they felt it was largely irrelevant in terms of their growing up.

"Their fathers influenced their thinking and the way they communicated.

"They were very clear, saying things like: 'When I stop to think about it, he influenced what I am and what I think.'"



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Dr Smith said that the study participants had also challenged the perceived markers to manhood and the meaning of significant events eg 21st birthdays, gaining the keys to the car, leaving school and first relationships.

“These events are common to everyone, but the events my participants cited as being significant in their development as a man were unique to the individual,” he said.

“One cited the school excursion to Fiji, another talked about the time his father had bought a commercial fishing boat and he had had to crew for the business.

“There is a lot of talk about reintroducing the rites of passage for young boys but what my research shows is that the young men interviewed could not make sense of that in their culture.

“My respondents felt some of the events like birthday celebrations were more for their parents’ benefit than theirs.

“It is a cautionary note for society and its thinking around these sorts of events, it is perhaps time to ask who are they doing it for.”

Dr Smith said the participants had said that becoming a man meant being responsible, being independent and being able to make decisions.

“This was fascinating as the traits they described were no different for a girl becoming a woman,” Dr Smith said. “It was a bit of a paradox.”

Dr Smith said the findings of the study were a wake up call to families, churches and community groups in their dealings with young men.

“We all acknowledge there is an issue with boys, but the results of my research show we should not be jumping to conclusions and making assumptions about what guys are actually thinking,” he said.

“We need to hear their stories and their perceptions and have conversations with them about what it means to be a man and engage guys in that situation to talk about it.

“The church also needs to think about the role they can play in young men’s lives.

“My perception of churches is that they are not good at dealing with the whole of life stuff. Sometimes they get caught up either doing social activities or teaching theology. They don’t talk enough about life issues.”

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