

THE ARCHBISHOPS OF
CANTERBURY & YORK

LOVE MATTERS



Report of the Archbishops' Commission
on Families & Households

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Foreword

by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York



It is appropriate that the third in a trilogy of reports we have commissioned since 2019 – the first on housing, the second on care and support – should conclude with a focus on families and households. Our flourishing as a society depends on the flourishing of our families and households, the base unit of our communities. We can only solve the most intractable policy challenges of our times by ensuring that families and households are at the heart of our collective thinking and actions.

'Love Matters' focuses on issues to which we can all relate in some way, for good and ill. Whether it is those we live with, are related to, or the people we choose, family is usually the source of both our greatest joy and deepest sorrow. It is the place where we find our most profound fulfilment and most intense disappointment, where we experience the messiness and wonder of life.

As its title suggests, this report reminds us about the force that has an almost unique power to transform lives and communities: love.

Love is what must bind us together if we are all to flourish. We are not referring here to love as an emotional feeling, but rather that which takes us into the realm of deep, sacrificial, enduring commitment to the flourishing of one another. This kind of love is at the very heart of the Good News: for God so loved the world that he sent his son, Jesus Christ, to live among us, to demonstrate a radical new way of relating to one another, to show abundant care, grace and mercy to the least likely people.

We pray *'Thy Kingdom Come'* in eager expectation that Jesus will return to establish a perfect new creation, but also in the knowledge that its realisation feels distant for many families and households. The pandemic touched every aspect of our family life and relationships. The cost-of-living crisis means that life can become a perpetual struggle for survival. Too many children and young people grow up in the midst of conflict. Discrimination, division and deep inequality are pernicious barriers to those seeking life in all its fullness.

'Love Matters' delivers a powerful, deeply compelling call to action for all of us: put families first – place the hopes, needs, priorities and aspirations of families at the very centre. The Government must be attentive to the material and relational needs of families and households. The Church of England must lead by example, witnessing to the love of God, seeking the common good, providing a place of safety and welcome for everyone. As individuals, whether married, single, in a couple, or any other form of household, we are called to commit to relationships of all kinds that build up one another.

For the sake of our families and households, this report asks us to reimagine a kinder, fairer, more forgiving society: kinder, because we all need the support, care and love of others; fairer, because we are all diminished when any are held back; more forgiving, because we all make mistakes and are all dependent on the mercy of one another and of God.

We thank the Commission Members for their work, which is the product of deep thought, care and vision. They have asked us to do something radical: to prioritise family; to say loudly and boldly that love-in-action is the foundation of all human life.

Archbishop Justin Welby & Archbishop Stephen Cottrell



Key Messages

We must...

Support relationships throughout life,

ensuring that everyone is able to develop and maintain loving and caring relationships, manage conflict well and promote the flourishing of individuals and families.

Value families in all their diversity, meeting their basic needs by putting their wellbeing at the heart of Government policymaking and our community life, including religious communities.

Honour singleness and single person households, recognising that loving relationships matter to everyone.

Empower children and young people,

developing their relational skills and knowledge, recognising their value and agency, protecting them from harm, and giving them the best start in life.

Build a kinder, fairer, more forgiving society,

removing discrimination, division and deep inequality for the sake of every family and household.

Key Priorities for Action

We must...

Maximise the protective effect of family.

Ensure that all loving relationships matter and are valued in everything we do.

Give every child the best possible start in life.

Tackle the societal issues which limit people's ability to flourish.





1. A STORY OF HOPE, OPPORTUNITY AND LOVE

‘Families really matter! Loving families are central to the wellbeing of adults and children living in all types of households, in all corners of the globe. Family life can be messy, but every family and every household should be a place where people of all ages, cultures, faiths and no faith are best supported to thrive’

We live in a time of extensive social, cultural, economic and technological change alongside considerable diversity in family and household living arrangements. The nature of family life has long been influenced by religion and belief systems, but as expectations change and choices increase, well-established values are frequently confronted and traditional beliefs challenged. We have an opportunity to embrace or shape these changing times by rooting our response to them in enduring values of commitment to one another in service and loving relationships. Extensive evidence shows that whatever the changes and challenges facing our society, supportive, loving families are critical to

the wellbeing of adults and children.

Families and households are not to be idolised in and of themselves, however. Our Commission has shown that families and households of all shapes and sizes can provide protection and stability for their members. They should always be places where everyone is able to flourish, thereby forming the bedrock of a strong and stable society. Moreover, with increasing numbers of people living alone, either through choice or circumstance, we believe that singleness should be recognised as both honourable and valuable, as should households in which residents do not fit into a conventional understanding of ‘family’. People living in a wide

variety of circumstances should be able to find fulfilment and contribute to the flourishing of society.

In a time of immense uncertainty in everyday life two key questions need to be urgently addressed:

1. How can we best support every individual and every family to flourish in our complex and ever-changing society?
2. What kind of society do we want to live in?

These challenging questions are at the heart of the Commission on Families and Households, established by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York in Spring 2021. The Commission's task was, first, to draw attention to the pressures and hardships facing families and households in all their diversity in England today and, second, to offer practical ways to deal with those pressures. The Commission was asked to make proposals that would shape public policy relating to families and households across all government departments; and to recommend action by the Church of England, alone or in partnership with other Christian denominations, faith groups and external agencies, that will maximise the support given to families and households in radical new ways.¹

This report is the Commission's response to the task set by the Archbishops. Despite the daunting challenges facing families and households in England today, it tells a story of hope, opportunity and love. It is a story that sets a new and sensitive narrative for our country at a moment in time when the unprecedented events of the past three years require us to pause, reflect and re-evaluate how we understand and promote human flourishing amidst considerable uncertainty in the world around us. In the chapters which follow, the thorny issues to be

addressed are laid bare, and the opportunities for constructive and lasting change are celebrated, thus laying a solid foundation for hope inspired by a bold new vision.

How this story began

'The opportunity, necessity and challenge to reimagine our society come rarely... Moments of change are moments of great hope and opportunity.'²

The Commission's story began in 2018 when the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, sought to reimagine Britain. He described it as

'a time of great economic, political and technological change in which our values, virtues and practices will be reshaped.'³

He was writing after the 2016 EU referendum, the outcome of which – Brexit – would dramatically shift the UK's relationship with the European Union and with the rest of the world, inviting us to imagine and plan a new future in which global relationships would be re-aligned and society could harness new opportunities to flourish.

In reimaging the future, Archbishop Justin looked at the basic building blocks of our society and pointed to the family as the nucleus in every community:

'A happy family life, lived out amid difficulty and challenge, is among the deepest satisfactions of human existence, and when it is prevalent in society it lays the foundations for hope and national character.'⁴

He nevertheless recognised that family life in England in the twenty-first century is fluid and diverse, and that families today reflect the

fundamental changes that have occurred in the way adults have managed their personal relationships in the period since the Second World War. Cautioning against idolising families, Archbishop Justin acknowledged that family life, while being the greatest source of contentment and hope, can also be the main location of despair and the cause of unhappiness and trauma. He therefore questioned how families should be understood in modern society, and the values that will support and sustain them.

Drawing attention to the 'gross inequalities' in education, health and income, and the importance of reimagining the common good, Archbishop Justin asked readers of his book to consider the kind of society they want to build for the future. This challenge was the starting point for the Commission and for this story.

Facing new challenges

Much has happened since Archbishop Justin laid down his challenge. There are twists and turns in every good story. Society and our daily lives do not stand still. Change is continuous and society is always evolving, but the last three years have witnessed unforeseen dramatic events such that it is even more critical to answer the questions

posed by Archbishop Justin. These events provide a stark backdrop to our story.

The COVID-19 pandemic

When Reimagining Britain was published in 2018, the devastating impacts of a global pandemic which brought COVID-19 to our nation in spring 2020 had not been expected. The coronavirus pandemic turned everyone's life upside-down. As it continues to spawn new variants, it requires ongoing political and personal vigilance as we learn to live with a potentially deadly virus, and with the long-term detrimental consequences and impacts of COVID-19 and the severe restrictions which were imposed on all of us.

The cost of living crisis

Having begun to recover from a period of economic hardship in Britain following the serious financial crash which began in 2008, families and households had not been prepared for the dramatic increase in the cost of living which reached crisis point in 2022. This has been accompanied by huge price rises in energy, and significant high inflation in Britain and in economies world-wide, leading the Government to make hard political and economic choices



¹ The Commission's full aims can be found in Appendix 2

² Welby, J (2018) *Reimagining Britain: Foundations for Hope*, Bloomsbury p5/6

³ *ibid.* p59

⁴ *ibid.* p65

in response. We examined the worrying tension between eating and heating as the demand for support from foodbanks escalated, and churches were asked to offer warm spaces to those facing impossible fuel bills during the winter of 2022/23. It was inevitable that families and households already experiencing poverty would struggle even more to make ends meet.⁵

The illegal invasion of Ukraine

In addition to these unexpected crises at home, we had not anticipated the crushing illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine in spring 2022, which brought devastating war to mainland Europe after seventy years of relative peace.⁶ This cruel war has brought extensive destruction to communities in Ukraine, threatened global security, and negatively impacted the supply of vital grain and energy across the globe. This restriction on supplies has hit the poorest countries most harshly.

This deadly war has led to the movement of Ukrainians, particularly women and children, from their homeland in search of safety, including here in Britain. Since men are expected to stay at home and fight, many Ukrainian families are divided and separated by war.

Continuing humanitarian disasters

Other humanitarian crises elsewhere in the world, most recently the earthquake in Turkey and Syria, sometimes occasioned by climate change and/or political disruption, have brought misery, especially to poorer nations. Ongoing conflicts and repressive regimes continue to

blight the lives of many millions of children and families.

Desperation leads many to flee from torture, famine and hunger, and increasing numbers of young people and adults look for ways to find a better, safer life. Some do so through economic migration, others find themselves being asylum seekers and refugees. It is essential that Western societies and the wealthier nations of the world find new ways to ensure protection and a fair, just and compassionate approach to the plight of those seeking a safe place to live.

Climate change

In *Reimagining Britain*, Archbishop Justin acknowledged climate change as 'an existential danger to the planet and to its human occupants'.⁷ In recent years there has been a growing understanding across the globe of the scale of the challenge facing us all. Archbishop Justin points out that care for creation as an intrinsic value is deeply rooted in the whole of scripture, beginning in Genesis where human beings are tasked with caring for creation.

By 2016, the UN had recorded that:

'Climate change represents the single biggest threat to development, and its widespread, unprecedented impacts disproportionately burden the poorest and most vulnerable.'⁸

The IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) Report in March 2023 makes clear that:

'Risks of inaction on climate are immense and the way ahead requires change at a scale not seen before.'⁹

⁵ See: Church Action on Poverty and the Archbishop of York (2022) *Why Widening Conversations is a Vital First Step Towards Tackling Poverty Together*

⁶ There were, of course, internal wars in Bosnia, and Europe witnessed the disintegration of Yugoslavia during these years.

⁷ Welby, (2018) op.cit. p 215

⁸ United Nations (2016) Sustainable Development Goal 13: Taking Urgent Action to Combat Climate Change and its Impacts

⁹ Boehm, S., and Schumer, C., (2023) *IPCC Report on Climate Change*, World Resources Institute



20,000 students gather in climate change protest rally, School Strike 4 Climate, and demand urgent action on climate change Sydney, Australia - March 15, 2019.

During the life of the Commission we have witnessed dramatic evidence of global warming and extreme weather events, the accelerating extinction of some species, and the relatively greater impacts of climate change on poorer nations.

The need for bold remedies

These crises show little sign of abating. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in September 2022, the Secretary-General of the United Nations¹⁰ referred in his Human Development Report to:

'the uncertain times and unsettled lives which exacerbate inequalities.'

He emphasised the urgent need to empower people to shape a better future in a world of transformation.

During the events of the last few years the

wellbeing of individuals and families has been severely tested. It is now more urgent than it was in 2018 to reimagine Britain, to reassess our values and recreate a vision for a stronger, fairer, kinder and more loving society: a society which can build and sustain individual and family flourishing, whatever the challenging circumstances which engulf us now and in the future.

In order to achieve these objectives, following such moments of great change, the opportunity, necessity and challenge for us all is twofold: first, to understand fully and urgently address those factors that create barriers to human flourishing and increase uncertainty, disadvantage and inequality; and, second, to promote those factors which can enhance individual and family wellbeing and give everyone renewed hope for a brighter future. This story seeks to address this opportunity, necessity and challenge.

¹⁰ Secretary-General United Nations (September 2022), 2021/22 Human Development Report: *Uncertain Times, Unsettled Lives: Shaping our Future in a World in Transformation* <https://hdr.undp.org/content/202122-human-development-report-released>

How the Commission can contribute

The opportunity to reimagine society has been readily embraced by the Chair of the Commission, Professor Janet Walker OBE, the Co-Chair, The Rt Revd Paul Butler, Bishop of Durham, and committed, dedicated Commission members drawn from different backgrounds, cultures, faiths and walks of life.¹¹ Every member of the Commission has deep experience of the sadness, delights, challenges and joys associated with family and household life: for some of us, the last two years have been personally very challenging. Everyone has brought to the task in hand compassion, humility and a determination to promote a fairer society. Throughout their activities, Commission members have been continually enriched in their deliberations by the contributions of other members of the Church of England and by a group of leading experts from different disciplines.¹² The Commission has been ably supported by a Secretariat at Lambeth Palace.

Since May 2021 the Commission has taken evidence from a wide range of children, young people and adults living in different kinds of family and diverse household structures across England. Asking questions about what matters to them and how their lives could be better in future, Commission members have visited locations and communities around the country, talking to as many people as possible, some with faith and some with none.

We held focus groups with young people; visited schools to hear from pupils, parents and teachers; brought experts together to debate key issues and learn from the most recent research; and gained profound wisdom from leaders and members of different faith groups.

We have benefitted from the knowledge and advice of staff in key charities, the Children's Commissioner for England and the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales; and talked to successive Government Ministers to find out how the government intends to address the issues facing families and households. During our visits we have heard about many different programmes and exciting initiatives designed to assist families and households, and throughout our story we refer to the amazing work that is being undertaken in communities across the country.¹³

It has been an immense privilege to meet all those of different ages, cultures and backgrounds who have talked openly and robustly about their aspirations and hopes, their concerns and struggles, and their many suggestions for change to put families and households at the centre of policy-making, community life and the ministry of the Church of England. Whatever the stresses and strains of everyday life, there is an overwhelming consensus in everything we have heard that however we live our lives, families and loving relationships are essential to our wellbeing.

This has been consistently echoed in our conversations with young people. Central to the Commission's activities has been the commitment to listen to the voices of young people and to see the world through young eyes:

'If you are lucky enough to be part of any kind of family, you feel safe, happy, valued, respected and have a sense of belonging.'¹⁴

In all our conversations with young people they have been thoughtful, willing to share personal stories, and able to offer interesting insights into contemporary issues. Throughout this report we hear the voices of young people, family members

and professionals working with children and families, illustrating the challenges facing families and households, and their suggestions for changes that will enhance everyone's ability to thrive. Their voices are anonymous unless they have given explicit permission to be identified.

Central to the task has been an in-depth exploration of Christian theology, discovering what can be learned from Scripture, tradition and reason. The Bible tells a story which speaks to the very heart of what it is to be human – the questions, hurts and struggles; the joys, blessings and hopes. Dwelling on some of those points of connection between that narrative and the stories within it, and our exploration of how families and households can flourish, offers inspiration and challenge. We have also met with leaders and people from other faiths, learning from their beliefs and values to help us better understand the issues that worry us all, and to think radically about a new vision.

We are truly grateful for every contribution to our learning and our thinking. Throughout our report we have attempted to reflect everyone's views, and the information we have been given, accurately, respectfully and sincerely.

The Commission has also sought to track and learn from the changes in our social history which have shaped our cultural heritage today. The insights generated from all our conversations and visits to different communities around England enrich our story, and our historical and theological understandings provide a solid base for the observations and messages that we share and our recommendations for change. Our messages draw out the learning from the Commission which offers a guide to how we might understand and support individuals and families to flourish in today's society. They are relevant to all of us.

Our recommendations are offered primarily to the Church of England and to the Government, although we hope that other churches, faith communities, and organisations in the public and private sectors, particularly those working with children and families, might find them relevant and thought-provoking. Many of our recommendations suggest how changes in attitudes and narratives can support families and households to thrive, building on what is good and positive in our communities and our daily lives. Some recommendations require specific resources to be allocated to extend or develop new programmes which have been shown to enable individuals and families to live the best lives they can. This may take time to achieve, and may best be realised through partnerships and collaborations. We recognise that not all churches are in a position to make some of the changes we suggest, and that resources are often tight, but we hope that collaborative working might facilitate new opportunities. We believe that a commitment to foster loving relationships and to create a kinder, fairer, more forgiving society will provide a template for future policies and practices within the Church of England and in society generally.

Where does the story end?

As our society experiences a range of significant transformations, our story brings together the abundant evidence we have collected about the challenges in our society which threaten our wellbeing. We share this openly and honestly. We consider how the difficulties individuals and families encounter in everyday life can be better understood. We highlight examples of good practice and point to different ways in which everyone can be supported to flourish. Most importantly, we challenge and encourage everyone to reimagine a society in which love, opportunity and hope are central to our very existence. Inevitably, the Commission has not been able to investigate every aspect of modern

¹¹ See Appendix 1 for information about the Commission Members and other members of the Commission team.

¹² The names of the experts are listed in Appendix 1

¹³ The Commission gathered evidence from around the country

¹⁴ Young person, (2022) Member of the Family Justice Young People's Board giving evidence to the Commission

family and household life in detail. We have focused on those areas which we believe are of the most importance to most people.

Ultimately, our story seeks to empower the Church of England to be bold. This requires the Church to:

- be imaginative, innovative and committed in its support for each individual, family and household in our country
- bring additional wisdom to government policies in order to strengthen wellbeing and reduce human suffering
- work in partnership with other Christian denominations, other faiths, community organisations, and government to create a society in which we can celebrate and share mutually reinforcing common values and principles, enabling everyone to thrive

Our story calls the Church of England to be transformative and to take a leading role in creating a new narrative and shaping a new vision for everyone in our society, irrespective of whether they have a faith or not. The Church of England is called to be the church for all people in all places.¹⁵

This story does not end: it will need to continue. More work will need to be undertaken after this report has been scrutinised. Change may not happen quickly, there will be bumps and obstacles along the way, but with a shared sense of what the common good looks like and a shared commitment to seize the opportunities open to us, the Commission's story offers much to celebrate and much to look forward to as others take forward the actions which allow us to build a stronger, healthier, more equal society marked out by love, kindness, hope and care.

¹⁵ Cottrell, S., (2020) A Vision for the Church of England in the 2020s 'Christ centred and Jesus shaped. Simpler, humbler, bolder'

2. UNDERSTANDING 'FAMILY', UNDERSTANDING FLOURISHING

'The way people talk about their families and the meanings associated with them indicates great diversity while still revealing shared priorities and values'¹

While the overwhelming evidence from our Commission is that 'families matter', experience of family life is intensely personal, varied and no two families are exactly the same. So, at the beginning of the Commission's journey, we needed to do two things:

1. To understand what 'family' means to adults and to young people today.
2. To understand what individuals and families of all shapes and sizes need to be able to flourish in our complex society.

How the Commission has used the terms 'family' and 'household'

We were aware that the terms 'family' and 'household' are frequently used interchangeably. The Commission decided early on that to attempt to define 'family' too tightly is unhelpful. We agreed that we should ground our thinking within current definitions of both family and household used by the census. This enables us to understand how national statistics are

¹ See: McKie, L., and Callan, S., (2012) Understanding Families: A Global Introduction, Sage: cited in Walker, J., and Abela, A., (2014) Partnership, parenting and children's best interests in A. Abela and J. Walker, (eds) Contemporary Issues in Family Studies. Wiley Blackwell p384

presented and trends calculated. 'Household' is relatively easy to define but 'family' is much more complicated, hence 'household' tends to be chosen as the term used in policy-making.

Our work, though, suggests that for all its complexity 'family' is how people think and is the basis on which policy should be made. We note that the Children's Commissioner² has stated that public policy should define families 'with a strong emotional connection', putting strong and loving families *'front and centre of our politics and policy-making.'* She describes this as a paradigm shift from the current approach to family policy.

By not defining 'family' tightly at the outset we were able to explore how it is actually understood by children, young people and adults across all our communities in England. This, in turn, allows us to make recommendations based on family reality, rather than on any rigid, or even idealised view of what constitutes family for people today.

According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS):

'A family is defined as a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with or without children, or a lone parent, with at least one child, who live at the same address. Dependent children are those aged under 16 living with at least one parent, or aged between 16 and 18 in full-time education. Non-dependent children are those living with their parent(s) and are either: aged 19 years or over and have no spouse, partner or child living in the household; or aged 16 to 18 years and are not in full-time education and have

no spouse, partner or child living in the household. Non-dependent children are sometimes called adult children.'³

According to the ONS:

'A household is one person living alone, or a group of people, not necessarily related, living at the same address who share cooking facilities and share a living room, sitting room or dining area.'⁴

We noted that the number of households in England and Wales had risen by 6 per cent in the period between the 2011 census and the 2021 census.⁵

As a Commission we have used the term 'household' to refer to individuals in line with the ONS definition, rather than using the terms families and households interchangeably. For the most part, therefore, we use 'household' to refer to individuals not living within a family group, but as people living in houses of multiple occupancy, or on their own, and a 'family' as composed of persons identifying themselves as a family group living primarily, but not exclusively, under the same roof.

Nevertheless, we recognise that whatever their family circumstances or relational status, an individual living in a household alone or sharing with friends or other individuals but not living in a family group, more often than not is still a member of a family. The number of single person households has been increasing steadily as a result of a range of social and economic factors, and most people will spend some or all of their adult life living singly through choice, circumstance or calling.



We are aware that some people live rather transitory lives on the borderline of family and household. They can be described as members of a shifting population of casual occupants and loose attachments, such as lodgers and sofa surfers. Some people engage in cuckooing, and others find themselves being homeless, moving around and often living on the street. Many of these people have families but they do not live with them. We consider some of the drivers for the lack of stability in living arrangements later in the report when we explore the impact of societal challenges which can limit individual flourishing.

The meaning of family

'There will be points in our lives when those beyond our biological family play an important role in mentoring and encouraging us, or fostering a sense of acceptance, belonging, identity and purpose.'⁶

The ONS definitions do not give us any sense of what 'family' means to each individual. As a first step in our evidence-gathering, we launched a Call for Evidence and asked questions about family life today. It provided an opportunity to engage with a wide range of people between the ages of 18 and 90, different faith communities, and organisations working with children and families in England.⁷ Subsequently we engaged with children and young people around England and asked similar questions.

² Children's Commissioner (2022) *A positive approach to parenting, Part 2 of the Independent Family Review* Office of the Children's Commissioner

³ Office for National Statistics (ONS) *Office for National Statistics. 2022. Families and households QMI*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/populationandhouseholdestimatesenglandandwales/census2021#population-growth-of-england-and-wales-between-2011-and-2021>

⁶ Gittoes, J., (2022) *A Christian vision of families and households*. Theology Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁷ See: Walker, J (2022) *Briefing One: Understanding the Meaning of Family*. Briefing Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

We began by asking adults to share their understanding of what family means to them and to describe the main characteristics of both individual and family flourishing. From the responses,⁸ we established a clear consensus about the continuing importance of 'family' in everyday life, despite considerable diversity in family form.

We learned that any one-size-fits all understanding of 'family' is dangerously misleading, and fails to recognise the richness of family life today in which *family and household demographics continue to shift and change as they always have.*⁹ There is abundant evidence that although demographics can influence both the challenges and opportunities for individuals and families to flourish, whether and how they can flourish as human beings is not dependent on family structure, or on a particular shape and size of a family unit.

While many people described 'family' within a more traditional construct, most people included a broader understanding of what family means to them, shedding light on what they regard as the essential characteristics of positive family life. The following response was typical of many:

'[Family is] a place of stability, caring and love. Where you are accepted for yourself. A place where you can give support to those you hold close to your heart. A place of spiritual support for all.'¹⁰

Strong messages emerged about the limitations of understanding 'family' with reference to structure or family form, and about thinking of family as necessarily composed solely of close relatives. While many parents and children may live in a relatively small group under the same roof, perhaps with grandparents, there

was widespread recognition that other family members often live in different communities and different households, and are still considered as 'family'.

Moreover, the notion of 'place' is not confined to a specific building or a home, but encompasses different locations where those regarded as family members share the same characteristics and expectations of what being a 'family' means, such as ensuring mutual acceptance and support. Importantly, to be recognised as 'family' we learned that it is not necessary to be related by blood or to have children:

'[Family is] those whom you trust and have close relationships with, not necessarily blood relatives and not requiring children to be a complete family.'

These broader meanings remind us that 'family' can describe other kinds of relationships, and may not include blood-relations. They can be composed of friends or work colleagues who are considered to be 'family'. We heard through the Call for Evidence about the value of being a member of a church family, and its particular significance for people who live alone. This was echoed by members of different faith communities:

'I have a church family, which I am connected to through my church. Family is not just about those who live in the same household. As a single person who lives on their own that [ONS] definition is problematic.'

'Family' can include those friends who support each other although living alone in different households.'

⁸ See: Walker, J (2022) *Briefing One: Understanding the Meaning of Family*. Ibid; and Walker, J., (2022) and *Briefing Two: Understanding the characteristics of individual and family flourishing*. Briefing Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁹ Professor Susannah Cornwall, Commission Theology Round Table, February, 2022

¹⁰ This and subsequent extracts are drawn from evidence given by respondents to the Call for Evidence with permission to quote the responses

There is nothing new in the way in which close friends are considered to be like family. Having friends is seen as necessary to being able to flourish as an individual. Friendships matter and there are many references to the importance of friendships in the Bible and the privilege of choosing one's friends (for example, John 15:15b-16a):

'The power of choosing someone is possibly the most powerful act of the human experience.'¹¹

A number of people suggested that friendships themselves need to be nurtured if they are to flourish:

'There are great biblical examples of strong friendships e.g. Jonathan and David. They can be a great source of support, encouragement and help us to flourish. To enable friendships to flourish, people need to have time to spend time with each other and to be able to offer time to support [friends] when it is needed.'

An exploration of the Gospels¹² reminds us that while Jesus participated in family life, he also

'valued the company of friends as he gathered a group around him and was supported in his ministry notably by a group of women (Luke 8. 1-3). He sustained relationships that he both nurtured and that nurtured him.'¹³

And therein lies the key – being 'family' is about shared practices and the provision of mutual care and support. In short, it is about being nurtured.

The characteristics of 'family-ness'

Our exploration of the meaning of family led the Commission to understand 'family' in

the broadest possible terms, embracing a number of different kinds of structures and relationships. However, young people and adults all stressed that to be regarded as 'family', whatever the shape and size, an identifiable set of qualities or values, such as mutual care and support, must always characterise 'family-ness'. The vast majority of these qualities are regarded as non-negotiable if members are to thrive. The following detailed response to our Call for Evidence encapsulates the qualities/ characteristics of being 'family' that were referred to by many:

'Family is ... a place to find personal and group identity and learn about ourselves; a place of belonging and unconditional love and acceptance where one can flourish and grow physically, emotionally and spiritually. It is a place to feel safe, have the freedom to grow and learn and make mistakes ... We learn what love is - being securely connected to people as well as how to love others (1 Corinthians 13: 3-5). We learn about trust, commitment and values. We also learn how to manage life when things go wrong by resolving conflict, offering and receiving forgiveness and taking steps towards reconciliation. Family is where we learn our place in the world; we make choices; experience boundaries, and learn consequences. For those with a religious faith, this is where life in relationship to God is modelled and 'caught'.'

Family is also where children should feel safe, be fed, nurtured, protected, cared for and loved, and experience the comfort of parenting. These qualities define 'family-ness' rather than describe specific family types, allowing us to construct a positive vision of how we should understand diverse families in today's

¹¹ The Community of St Anselm, Rule of Life, www.stanselm.org.uk p5

¹² Butler, P., (2022) *Pursuing the Holy Family*; Strawbridge, J., (2022) *Jesus and the Family in the Gospels*. Theology Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

¹³ Butler, op.cit.

society. The special sets of relationships that 'family' signifies are clearly built on a number of identifiable characteristics, irrespective of the kind of family structure in which children, parents and families live and love.

The centrality of Love

'Where there is great love there are always miracles.'¹⁴

Not surprisingly, first and foremost of the characteristics of 'family-ness' and the one mentioned by the vast majority of adults, children and young people who contributed to the Commission is **love**. Throughout the life of the Commission, 'love' is the word, as a noun and a verb, that is most commonly associated with family life. Many people referred to love as essential in promoting personal security, which in turn promotes good mental health and wellbeing.

However we think of family and whatever the kind of family or household in which people live, everyone needs to love and be loved. In the absence of love, people may become lonely, isolated and suffer with poor mental health. We give and receive love because it lies at the heart of the Trinity. As the writer of the first letter of John puts it, 'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God.'¹⁵

Love is undoubtedly the essential characteristic of supportive family life which knows no boundaries and which is expected to endure through the best and the worst of times.

The Children's Commissioner for England has highlighted the significant changes in family life in recent decades and concluded that families are best defined

'through loving and strong relationships, through practical and emotional support, and through a life spent together'¹⁶

She described this as a positive vision of family strengths. The Children's Commissioner's Family Life Survey found that the three words most associated with 'family' were 'loving, happy, home' (children), and 'loving, home and caring' (adults).¹⁷ Love is essential to our wellbeing and to our lives together. Humans are made in the image of the loving God to love and be loved. Yet we know that it can be difficult to talk about love: it is a word that is so powerful that it can be exciting, challenging and scary.

In popular culture, love can refer to many different kinds of activities and feelings. Soap operas and reality TV shows such as Love Island focus on relationships that may appear to be loving but are often dysfunctional and portray a very synthetic kind of love. These narratives provide a backdrop to everyday life, especially for young people who capture much of their learning about love and relationships from social media. Julie Gittoes¹⁸ reminded us that Neighbours, the Australian soap which made many people in England 'at home' on Ramsey Street for 37 years, was a blend of families and households in which neighbours became good friends when their lives intertwined. The highlights of the series which produced heightened viewing figures were frequently the programmes about characters falling in love and getting married.

As the Children's Commissioner has pointed out, despite frequent portrayals of love in our culture, love is rarely referred to in any analysis of family life,¹⁹ nor in policies and services which aim to support families. Yet we have concluded as a Commission that love is central to how

people think about 'family' and it is necessary for families and households to flourish.

Love provides us with a blueprint for strong relationships. The New Testament provides a vivid yet simple understanding of love in its purest form which sets the principles for how we should relate to each other. In St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we are told that:

'Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes in all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.'²⁰

This text, which is popular at weddings and funerals, frames love not as an unattainable ideal, but something which is deeply practical,

with Jesus Christ as our teacher. We see a description of love being worked out in human circumstances, relationships and situations with kindness and patience, laying aside boasting, pride and dishonour. It speaks of trust and perseverance rather than keeping records of wrongs or being easily moved to anger. What these verses, and many more besides, make clear is that love is not a feeling but an attitude, a choice, a commitment to give to, and promote the flourishing of the other. Love puts others before self.

If every family and household could aspire to this kind of loving as the foundation on which flourishing can be achieved, then our society would be stronger, kinder, fairer and more just. We know that this can be hard, which is why we must support and encourage one another.

Love in Scripture

In scripture 'Love' is taken for many things: something relational which binds us to others - family, friends, neighbours. We expect it to find expression in compassion or desire; for it to be marked by faithfulness and joy. Love can be sacrificial - literally an offering of oneself, a giving whether it is received or reciprocated or not. Ultimately such love is the life and movement of God as Trinity. A love which we can trust and hold onto as families and households come under pressure or change shape; but it is also a love which takes shape in advocating for policies and priorities which strengthen them. A deep and compassionate and concern for how we live - alone and together - is part of witnessing to God's love and seeking or serving God's kingdom.²¹ The Bible tells us that God is love and love comes from God.²² Psalm 33: 5 tells us that the earth is full of God's unfailing love. Human love is relational and interpersonal but grounded in our being creatures of the God who is love.

¹⁴ Willa Cather (1876-1947)

¹⁵ 1 John 4.7, and in full 4. 7-12

¹⁶ Children's Commissioner (2022) *Family Review Part 1: Family and its protective effect*. p7

¹⁷ *ibid.* p9

¹⁸ Gittoes, J., *op.cit.*

¹⁹ *ibid.* p47

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 13. New Revised Standard Version

²¹ Gittoes *op.cit.*

²² See John, 4: 7,8,16

In 1983 *The Charter of Rights of the Family*²³ was presented by the Holy See to all persons, institutions and authorities concerned with the mission of the family:

'It describes the family as more than a juridical, social and economic unit'; rather it constitutes a 'community of love and solidarity' and a 'place where different generations can come together to help one another to grow in human wisdom.'²⁴

The importance of love featured strongly throughout our evidence-gathering activities. At its simplest, then, this is a story about love.

So how should we understand 'family' today?

'I believe many things could be considered a family, these can be big or small. For example, in a workplace, like a school, a small sports team, or even just one person. However, there are a few things that these different types of families have in common, and that is everyone is supportive, reliable, and loves each other unconditionally.'²⁵

We need to use our imagination. If we understand families as comprising groups of people who at their best should be mutually supportive, kind, loving, and who provide safety, security and protection for their members on a long-term basis, then it is important for the church and policy-makers to focus on how these characteristics can be bolstered and fostered, particularly when families face difficult circumstances which threaten their stability.

Our understanding of family requires us to recognise some widely shared values and beliefs:

1. Families are central to our psychological, emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing.
2. Well-functioning families provide protection and stability for their members, enabling them to thrive.
3. Strong, stable, loving families are the bedrock of strong, stable societies.

Furthermore, the importance of 'home' for children and adults of all ages highlights the significance of where we live, irrespective of the composition of those who live there. Our homes matter, they are valued by those who live in them. Home is where we live, where we belong, a place of safety, and for many, a place of love.

Family members value connectedness, shared experiences, and the giving of practical and emotional support:

'What distinguishes family from other types of relationships is the depth of the connection, and a sense of unconditional support. The ability of family to be relied upon, even if there were arguments or disagreements.'²⁶

Looking through the lenses of young people who gave evidence to the Commission there was similar clarity in their responses to those of adults: to be considered as 'family' does not necessitate a certain type of relationship between the members, or a specific family form. What matters is the depth of the connections and the support which can always be relied upon. Young people referred to their parents and to their brothers and sisters as those who can be relied on and, frequently, also referred to their 'best friends' as being like family. These are the friends who understand them and are always there for them. Importantly, many young people

talked about the central importance of being loved.

Young people who are care-experienced told us about a range of 'family' settings they had lived in while growing up. These included foster families, kinship carers and periods spent in a residential care setting. For these young people, their understanding of family had been influenced by the circumstances which had led to them experiencing the care system, reminding the Commission that our personal experiences in childhood heavily influence our understanding of 'family' as adults:

'Family means the people who are always there for you and you are always there for them, it's the people who are the most special to you ... Family is who makes you happy, so family is who you choose.'²⁷

One young person who had experienced being placed with many different families said:

'I have got to a point where the word family can mean anything ... anyone can be your family as long as there is mutual trust, respect and forgiveness.'²⁸

Quite simply, 'family' refers to people who are bound together by love and kindness.

We have concluded that 'family' today, in all its meanings, should be understood as the place where children, young people and adults:

- are able to grow and be themselves
- are confident in their identity and their place in the world
- find belonging and security
- give and receive love
- receive stable and consistent care
- feel safe

²⁷ *Hearing the Voices of Young People Who Have Experienced the Family Justice System* (2022). Supporting Papers I www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

²⁸ *ibid*



²³ This Charter is available online at www.vatican.va

²⁴ Gittoes, op.cit.

²⁵ Evidence given to the Commission by a member of the Family Justice Young People's Board (2022)

²⁶ Children's Commissioner op.cit p32

- can make mistakes
- learn about trust, respect, commitment and values
- learn to manage conflict well and about the power of reconciliation
- forgive and are forgiven
- learn about appropriate boundaries

For the most part, it is a child's parent(s) that provide the bedrock from which these important benefits flow. But for a significant minority this is not necessarily the case.

In addition, for people of faith, their family is where they learn about and grow in faith together, and where they share their beliefs and the values which guide positive, constructive everyday life.

We should not have any illusions that every family and every household is always some kind of 'happy-ever-after' place of safety and unconditional love. Not everyone or every family flourishes. Family life is invariably very messy, and there are many circumstances which undermine loving relationships.

Understanding human 'flourishing'

'Flourishing - the condition of being in blossom; thriving; prospering; successful; to be in one's prime.'²⁹

What do individuals and families need in order to flourish? We might have been tempted to conclude that 'all you need is love.'³⁰ However, love, although central to family-ness, is unlikely to be sufficient on its own to assure human flourishing.

The absolute necessity of meeting basic human needs

One dominant theme emerged from our Call for Evidence: in order for an individual and a family to flourish, each person must have their basic needs met as a pre-requisite. These include shelter, water, food, clothing and having enough money to live on, all considered vital for survival. Without a roof over one's head, without food, and without any money to live on, life remains a huge struggle for survival and, to put it starkly, it is hard to thrive when you are trying to survive.

To do more than just survive people need to feel safe and free from fear, and have access to healthcare, education, and personal, emotional and financial security. True flourishing requires a sense of belonging, to be a part of a social group with friendship, intimacy and affection, and to live in a loving environment in which individuals can develop and grow, be accepted, respected, valued and loved. If all these needs are met, individuals should feel empowered to use their talents in a fulfilling way and to reach their potential and blossom:

'[Flourishing means] positive physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellbeing; ability to build long-lasting relationships; a sense of autonomy and agency; living life with purpose and balance.'

Learning to communicate well and deal with conflict constructively are key aspects of being able to flourish. True flourishing, we were told, requires a sense of belonging, to be a part of a social group with friendship, intimacy and affection.

Family flourishing

Unless each individual can flourish, families struggle to flourish. While individual flourishing focuses on the self, the 'me', and the ways in which each person should be able to pursue their own goals and achieve personal happiness and fulfilment, family flourishing focuses on the 'we' and 'us', with individuals in a family working together to achieve mutual security, and a happy and fulfilled family life.

Tensions within families can be extremely challenging unless family members share similar goals, are attuned to each other's needs, feelings and wishes, are willing to work through difficulties without being judgemental, and are able to work together in harmony to achieve mutual security and wellbeing:

'A flourishing family is when all members of the family accept and respect each other, love each other and are there for each other'.

Inevitably, a number of external situations impact on family flourishing and we examine these in more depth in later chapters.

Living in faith

'Faith is a living and unshakeable confidence, a belief in the grace of God.'³¹

For people of faith, their faith is instrumental to their ability to flourish as individuals and within a family unit. Sharing a faith is believed to strengthen the ability to live in harmony. However, when family members have different faiths and adhere to different belief systems, this can be a potential source of conflict if the differences are not valued and the influence of faith on individual flourishing is not understood. When the different faith traditions and beliefs are understood and valued, however, this can be

a mutually enriching and wonderful experience. The Mothers' Union, for example, have specifically highlighted the richness of inter-cultural relationships in a multi-faith society and the importance of celebrating and supporting them.³²

Learning from theology is foundational to our Commission. We invited members of faith groups to share the key principles that can be drawn from Christian and other faith traditions and scriptures that enable families and households to flourish. While love, including loving one's neighbour as oneself, was by far the most frequently mentioned, others included compassion, respect, kindness, generosity, selflessness, and forgiveness, and the nine qualities identified as the 'Fruit of the Spirit' in Galatians 5.22: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Building on our understanding of family and human flourishing to create a solid foundation for family life

Where have we got to in our story so far? Our multicultural, diverse society provides a rich store of opportunities for developing and strengthening 'family-ness' which can be harnessed for the common good, and a clear direction for thinking about how to build a kinder, more loving society.

We need to learn how to sensitively blend continuing change and diverse meanings of family with the consistent and unchanging values that promote flourishing:

²⁹ Oxford English Dictionary

³⁰ With thanks to The Beatles

³¹ Martin Luther (1532)

³² Representatives of the Mothers' Union in conversation with the Commission

1. An understanding of family is a story of change and diversity

The meaning attributed to family is various and open to change. Everyone will experience different kinds of family during their lifetime: from their early years, through childhood to young adulthood, throughout adulthood and, potentially, to old age. This may include periods of time living in a family with parents and children, time spent living singly, and time spent living with friends, extended family members, or partners.

2. An understanding of human flourishing is a story of constancy and consistency

The characteristics of human flourishing do not change. The ingredients for flourishing are timeless. Individuals and families need to:

- have their basic physiological needs met
- love and be loved
- belong and be connected to others
- feel safe and protected from harm
- care and be cared for
- forgive and be forgiven
- be nurtured, valued, respected, cherished and accepted for who they are

The characteristics that enable individuals and families to flourish create a supportive structure of loving relationships, belonging and connectedness.

Key Messages from the Commission

1. Strong and stable families and households in all their diversity are:
 - the foundation for our society
 - of central importance to the individual wellbeing of children, young people and adults.
2. Singleness is a major part of our society. Single people, whether by choice or circumstance, should be recognised and honoured. They are almost always members of a family but do not live in a family group.
3. Human flourishing is essential in order for the wider family/household unit to flourish. Unless each individual in society is able to flourish, whether living within a family, or in another group, or as a single person, each family and each household will not flourish. Therefore, every child, young person and adult must have their basic needs met and be supported to flourish.
4. Loving relationships matter: the Church of England, other churches and faith groups, the Government, and wider society should encourage, foster and prioritise the development of loving relationships at every stage of life.
5. The Church of England should commit itself to helping families experience and enjoy God's empowering love.
6. We are all responsible – as partners, parents, children, siblings, friends and colleagues – for committing to loving, caring relationships that build one another up.

3. CELEBRATING DIVERSITY IN FAMILY LIFE

*'There is a persistent longing throughout human history, and across cultures, to see the family as the core social structure. This remains so today. Family is viewed as central to human flourishing.'*¹

While 'family' means different things to different people, there are certain characteristics that are essential to individual and family flourishing. In order to reimagine a society with a firm foundation based on 'family', we sought to understand how family life had changed in recent decades and to appreciate its complexities today through the lived experiences of children, young people and adults.

Changing family patterns

Family structures are diverse and fluid. During the last seventy years in the UK we have witnessed enormous changes which

have led to a multiplicity of family forms. Increasing numbers of children grow up without both biological parents being present and experience a range of family structures during childhood. The alternative legally-accepted ways of partnering, the increasing choice in organising family life, and the reduction in stigma associated with separation and lone-parenting renders families and households today qualitatively different.²

Nevertheless, certain family functions such as the nurturing of children and the caring of family members are universally acknowledged and expected. Many societies place a high value on the institution of marriage as the arrangement

¹ Butler, P., (2022) *Pursuing the Holy Family*. Theology Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

² Coontz, S., (2004) *Marriage, A History: How love conquered marriage*, Penguin

that supports these functions, believing that marriage provides stability and the best possible environment for raising children. Not surprisingly, therefore, a decrease in the number who choose to marry, together with an increase in separation and divorce, have led to concerns that the values associated with family life are under threat and in decline. While there have been significant social changes over recent decades, the idea that family life is in decline is not unique to our times. The challenge continues as to how to embrace these changes without colliding with or demeaning beliefs and cultural norms which favour more traditional approaches to family life. We explore this challenge as our story develops.

The wide variations in family life are not a recent phenomenon. Theologians have repeatedly made the point that in the Bible the understanding of families is complex and varied, and the 'traditional' or 'nuclear' family was not the norm.³ In the Gospels we find single-person households, friendship groups, siblings living together, people who have been married several times, cohabiting couples, multigenerational households, as well as parents and their children.⁴ Jesus affirmed the biological family but also denied it pride of place.⁵

'The early church created a new kind of household in which care for biological relatives remains, but is extended to a vast throng of siblings and neighbours, a family of many ethnicities and cultures that includes the widowed, the unmarried, the outsider and the stranger.'⁶

Households in the Gospels were flexible and frequently changing.⁷ The Commission explored these variations, looking through both Christian and historical lenses:

'As we pay attention to the ways in which families, households and relationships are configured - and what strengthens or weakens them - we come back to the metric of scripture, as a means of shaping our social life. The Christian tradition uses the language of holiness to describe this way of living well together - with hearts turned outwards to the other rather than inwards to the self.'⁸

A historical view of 'family'

Looking at family through a social history lens⁹ the Commission learned that:

'The early-Victorians revitalised the Protestant Reformation idea of the family as a godly commonwealth. It was an idea rooted in scripture - the household at the centre of society, acting as a pivotal site for the moral reformation of the community as a whole ... that provided a necessary corrective to the hierarchical patterns of society and the family at the heart of 18th century culture.'

By the late 19th century the family had lost its moorings in scripture and was bound up in nationalism, colonialism and power. The later Victorians produced over 80 family Bibles in less than 50 years and passages that did not

³ Hamley, I., (2022) The Family in the Old Testament; Strawbridge, J., (2022) Jesus and Family in the Gospels. Theology Papers I www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁴ Strawbridge, op.cit.

⁵ Williams, S. C., (2021) Presentation at the launch of the Commission. Supporting Papers I www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁶ ibid

⁷ Barton, S., (1992) *Family in J Green and S McKnight* (eds) Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels. Intervarsity Press pp226-229, cited in Strawbridge op.cit

⁸ Gittoes op.cit.

⁹ Williams. op.cit



conform to Victorian domestic sensibilities were bracketed out. In so doing, the Victorians sanctified their own cultural stereotypes and prevented scripture from challenging their ideals. By 1880 the state began to prescribe the moral and legal framework for the family:

'The state increasingly prescribes the moral boundaries of the family, using legislation to regulate what had previously been governed by family and church structures.'¹⁰

Sarah Williams has argued that in British culture we still live with the fall out of the profound dissonance generated by the Victorians, and perhaps the hardest thing for Christians is living with the tension between the ideal and the real.

Traditional conceptions of family life have focused on men as breadwinners and women as home-makers within a patriarchal model of family stability, based on long-held assumptions

about the roles, status and behaviour considered appropriate for men, women and children in society generally. By the late nineteenth century, women were beginning to expand the scope of their involvement in society beyond the family, particularly through philanthropic engagement. As the twentieth century unfolded:

'The family is portrayed as the chief treasure of the nation to be preserved. During and immediately after both world wars marriage and the family are idealised. The 1950s, for example, is characterised by profound nostalgia with regards to the family to a 'golden age of harmony between men and women in their highly differentiated roles within the family. The idea of a golden age of the family is used to reinforce social stability in periods marked, in fact, by high levels of social flux and fundamental political and cultural change.'¹¹

¹⁰ Williams, S., Papers prepared for the Commission

¹¹ ibid

While it is doubtful whether an idealised traditional image of family structure ever reflected the experience of the majority of families in England, it certainly does not reflect the reality for the majority today. Nevertheless, while there has been a major change in the roles of women and men in recent decades, there remain a minority who perpetuate a more traditional expectation of the appropriate role played by women in family and society. Even in mainstream media and advertising it is easy to see women and men portrayed in stereotypical roles, and in some Church of England churches there continues to be an expectation that women will prepare tea and refreshments and look after the children.

Differing partnerships, differing expectations?

The idealised image of family has strengthened the concept of 'family' as denoting a sense of stability. However, in order to promote stability across a range of family forms and create the conditions in which individuals and families can flourish, choice and diversity must be both celebrated and supported while instilling the values which support wellbeing and flourishing. As we have seen from all our conversations with young people and adults, neither the importance of family nor the values that surround it are in decline. Rather, as family life evolves to embrace the huge social, economic and technological changes in society, we have an amazing opportunity to reimagine a diverse society in which family is valued and strengthened, and which promotes the stability that enables family members to thrive in a variety of family constellations. Furthermore, as

a Commission, we would highlight the Christian values that underlie the work of the Archbishop's Commission on Housing – Sustainability, Safety, Stability, Sociability, Satisfaction and Sacrifice – as a basis on which this re-imagination can be built.

The Commission has focused much of its effort on how to make the most of this opportunity by asking two key questions:

1. What is the role of marriage today at a time in our history where there is greater choice than ever before about how to structure family life?
2. How can constructive, satisfying relationships of all kinds be fostered and maintained?

In this chapter we address the first of these questions. The second is discussed in Chapter 4.

Marital status today

Despite concerns about fewer couples choosing to marry, 'married' or 'civil partnered' remained the most common legal partnership status in 2020, accounting for just over half (50.6 per cent) of the population aged 16 years and over in England and Wales.¹³ In 2021 in the UK, 63 per cent of the 8.2 million families with children consisted of married couples; 14 per cent were cohabiting couples; and 23 per cent were headed by a lone parent of whom 90 per cent were women. In 2021, there were 133,618 people in same-sex civil partnerships and 268,522 same-sex couples who were married. The average age at marriage in the UK has risen to 32 for women and 34 for men.

In 2020, the first year that civil partnerships were recorded, 7,208 were recorded for

opposite-sex couples in England, and 745 for same-sex couples. The average (median) age at civil partnership for opposite-sex couples was 58.9 years for men and 56.3 years for women; for same-sex couples, the average ages at civil partnership were 49.8 years and 50.1 years respectively.¹⁴

The reality of cohabitation

Cohabitation has increased considerably in recent decades. While for very many couples cohabitation is a prelude to marriage or civil partnership, for a growing number it is a long-term relationship of choice. The number of cohabiting couples increased from around 1.5 million in 1996 to around 3.6 million in 2021, an increase of 144 per cent.¹⁵ In 1996, around 10 per cent of all opposite-sex couple families were cohabiting rather than married. In 2021, 22 per cent of couples who lived together were cohabiting rather than married or in a civil partnership.¹⁶

Between 1996 and 2020, the number of opposite-sex cohabiting couple families with dependent children more than doubled, from around 539,000 in 1996 to around 1.2 million in 2021.¹⁷ The proportion of such families as a proportion of all opposite sex families with dependent children in 1996 was around 9 per cent, increasing to around 19 per cent in 2021. The increase in the number of unmarried couples living together as a family was far

greater than the increase in both married couple families and lone-parent families. During the same period, the number of married couple families with dependent children fell slightly from around 5.2 million in 1996 to around 5.1 million in 2021. In 2019, marriage rates for opposite-sex couples had fallen to their lowest on record since 1862.¹⁸ The number of opposite-sex marriages has fallen by 50 per cent since 1972.

Between 1996 and 2021 the number of same-sex cohabiting couple families increased from around 16,000 to 166,000, which is an increase of around 938 per cent.¹⁹ By 2021 around 50 per cent of same-sex couples were in cohabiting partnerships, while the rest were either married or in a civil partnership.

Although cohabiting couples have limited legal protection in some areas, such as domestic abuse, cohabitation gives no general legal status to a couple, unlike marriage and civil partnership from which many legal rights and responsibilities flow. There have been many calls to increase the protection for cohabiting couples.²⁰ Cohabitants often feel their obligations to their relationships are functionally similar to those in a marriage or civil partnership, even if they are not legally obliged to take on such responsibilities.

There remains a widely-held public belief that cohabitation is akin to a 'common law marriage'.²¹ This myth has been described

¹² Gittoes, J., (2022) Theology Papers I www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

¹³ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2021) *Population estimates by marital status and living arrangements England and Wales 2020*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/populationestimatesbymaritalstatusandlivingarrangements/2020>

¹⁴ ONS, (2020), *Civil Partnerships in England and Wales*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/civilpartnershipsinenglandandwales/2020>

¹⁵ UK Parliament (November 2022) *Research Briefing, Common Law Marriage and Cohabitation* <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN03372/SN03372.pdf>

¹⁶ UK Parliament (November 2022) *Research Briefing, Common Law Marriage and Cohabitation* <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN03372/SN03372.pdf>

¹⁷ *ibid.* p9

¹⁸ ONS (2022) *Marriages in England: 2019* <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/marriagesinenglandandwalesprovisional/2019>

¹⁹ *ibid.* p10

²⁰ Women and Equalities Committee, (2022), *The rights of cohabiting partners*, HC <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmwomeq/92/report.html>

²¹ NatCen Social Research (2019) 'Almost half of us mistakenly believe that common law marriage exists' NatCen Social Research, cited in the Women and Equalities Committee Report. op.cit.

as a major factor preventing people from marrying, entering a civil partnership, or making cohabitation agreements and wills.²² The Women and Equalities Committee has argued that:

'The lack of comprehensive legal protections for cohabitants upon relationship breakdown means that women, especially women from ethnic minority backgrounds and those who have had a religious-only marriage, can suffer relationship-generated disadvantage.'

Debates about the legal status of cohabitation remain highly contentious. While many call for more protection, especially for mothers and their children, others argue that strengthening protection could undermine marriage further, weakening the importance of commitment, although there would appear to be little evidence for this.²³ However, if legal protection is introduced for cohabiting couples, cohabitation becomes effectively indistinguishable from

marriage or a civil partnership but without the public affirmation of vows and promises.

Why cohabit? Many reasons are put forward. For some couples, cohabitation avoids the legalities of marriage or civil partnership, particularly when a previous legal partnership has ended and there is trepidation about entering another one – the 'once bitten, twice shy' argument. For some, cohabitation avoids the perceived high costs often associated with wedding ceremonies, notably a party and a honeymoon. Other cohabiting couples believe that because they are happy and settled there is no need to change the status of the partnership or risk destabilising a relationship that is working. Some people regard their relationship as a purely private matter and do not want to be pressurised to conform to the expectation of others. Martha Gill²⁴ has suggested that rather than be concerned about the increasing levels of cohabitation we should celebrate the opportunity to reduce the numbers of marriages that end in separation:

²² Women and Equalities Committee. op.cit.

²³ ibid

²⁴ Gill, M; Writing in The Guardian 25 February 2023



allowed us to set our conversations in context, and to consider some of the current tensions and challenges that face families, the church and the state within a wider context, sensitising us to contradictions, cultural assumptions and underlying expectations.

The Commission has sought to understand the role of marriage in our society today within the context of increased choice about how couple partnerships can and should be formed, and the extent to which faith plays a central role in that choice. Our historical journey has illustrated the changes that have accompanied marriage and the nature of the marital relationship over time, from a hierarchical family structure in Agrarian England, and a steady increase in the nineteenth century towards an emphasis on marriage as an affective bond based on sentiment. While marriage was still mainly an economic union in the 1850s, the couple, rather than their families, increasingly became the initiators of a romantic relationship:

'Romantic love may be defined as the assumption that an emotional tie can and must be established with another person on the basis of the intrinsic qualities of that emotional tie, over and against any other kind of connection that may be established between two individuals such as the formal, legal or institutional structures of marriage. Such a definition, in principle, distinguishes romantic love from marriage – it distinguishes love and duty – and it introduces the idea that a romantic or emotional tie, an inward sentiment, takes priority over outward social commitments. In other words, romantic love becomes the defining criteria by which the quality of an enduring love relationship is assessed. Marriage as a social structure becomes secondary to romance as an experience.'²⁶

'Soaring levels of cohabitation among the young suggest that people are taking a lifelong commitment seriously enough to give it a trial run first. There may be fewer marriages. But fewer bad ones too.'

Gill's view is that people's romantic choices are their own business, and bad marriages can be 'seriously detrimental', especially for children. While the latter is undoubtedly true, bad relationships of any kind, including cohabiting relationships, can be seriously detrimental for children. What matters for children is stability and commitment and the quality of the relationships in the home. In this regard, cohabiting couples claim that commitment is high, irrespective of the legal status of the relationship, and this is not always recognised.

The debates about cohabitation indicate that we almost certainly need an improved understanding of

'the interconnections, across the life course, between the public and the private elements of contemporary marriage and cohabitation.'²⁵

So what is the role of marriage in modern society?

In order to understand the distinctive characteristics of families today and the role of marriage in modern society the Commission has looked through a historical lens. We distinguished major events and changes that gave rise to shifts in family life in the period from the late eighteenth century to the present day. This has enabled us to understand the complex inter-relationship between the social and economic structure of the family and shifts in cultural perceptions of the family and marriage over time. Developing a historical trajectory has

²⁵ Women and Equality Commission op.cit p254

²⁶ Williams, S., (2022) Discussion papers prepared for the Commission

At the end of the nineteenth century, however, as the state began to prescribe a moral and legal framework for families, this altered the perceptions of childhood and parenthood, and of marriage and the family as a self-governing unit:

'The state takes on roles that had previously been held and undertaken by either the church or the family, thereby changing the relationship between state and family in significant ways. There is a legal recalibration of power within the family. The state becomes the arbiter between different members of the family and the source of welfare provision for the family. The state increasingly prescribes the moral boundaries of the family, using legislation to regulate what had previously been governed by family and church structures. The state, often allied with scientific arguments, takes over from the church definitions of sexual differentiation, sexual behaviour and sexual taboos.'²⁷

By the twentieth century the previous extensive roles undertaken by the family were taken over by the state such that men and women were increasingly choosing to live alone before getting married, no longer expected to stay at home and support family members, becoming independent at least for a while.

Nevertheless, two world wars dramatically impacted on family life, women's employment outside the home while men were away at war, and living arrangements. By the 1950s, living conditions were improving with slum clearances, women were not necessarily required to work in the way they had during the wars, and family life became centred on a nuclear family, with increasing geographical distances between parents and children and their grandparents.

From a marriage perspective:

'the nuclear family is characterised by a higher level of mutuality between husband and wife, greater levels of expectation as to emotional and also sexual satisfaction within marriage and yet, at the same time, greater isolation of the marital unit from supportive kinship structures.'²⁸

Rather than the mid twentieth century being a golden age of family life, however, increasing tensions emerged in many marriages, resulting in a growing number of divorces. Importantly, birth control was increasingly acceptable and available and served to separate sexual intercourse from procreation, offering choice for women and heralding considerable shifts in the forming of romantic relationships:

'During the course of the 20th century, the importance of marriage as a social structure becomes secondary to romance as an experience within cultural perceptions of love. From the late 1960s, ideas of sexual compatibility, sexual gratification and satisfaction appended themselves to ideas of romantic love such that sex and romance begin to merge in radical ways. Just as romance becomes the hallmark of marriage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, thereby changing the ways in which marriage is imagined by the culture as a whole, so sexual pleasure becomes the hallmark of romance in the mid to late twentieth century, thereby changing the way in which intimacy is imagined. By the 1970s it is assumed that sexual attraction and sexual happiness are intrinsic and necessary characteristics both of romantic love and of any marriage that may occur as a result.'

²⁷ ibid

²⁸ ibid

take account of the differing expectations of men and women. Perry has indicated that the heterosexual dating market has a problem:

'Male sexuality and female sexuality, at the population level, do not match. On average, men want casual sex more often than women do, and women want committed monogamy more often than men do. Hook-up culture demands that women suppress their natural instincts in order to match male sexuality and thus meet the male-demand for no-strings sex.'³¹

The hook-up culture is normative among adolescents and young adults such that sexual behaviour outside traditional committed and loving relationships has become increasingly acceptable.³² Perry³³ suggests that in the absence of some kind of religious commitment, this behaviour is now the 'normal' route presented to girls as they become sexually active. As Perry says: loveless sex is not empowering.

From a historical perspective,³⁴ birth control is often described by historians as the key to eradicating sexual inequality between men and women. Through the use of birth control women take ownership of their own bodies and are empowered to enter the sex act in ways that are essentially speaking the same as men, with the same overall outcomes in terms of pleasure without long-term consequence. But the dislocation from a committed relationship is problematic and has led to what Williams describes as:

'a heroic story of struggle between the sexes in which birth control plays a defining role in unhooking the sex act from

'Just as romance reframes the cultural meaning of marriage, so the elevation of sexual pleasure reframes the cultural meaning of romantic relationships.'²⁹

These changes are significant. We know that the marriage relationship has changed through history, and we now live in a society where, as Williams has illustrated, there have been a series of dislocations of sex, both the idea of sex as well as sexual acts and behaviours, from the relational forms and social commitments within which sexuality and sexual intimacy were previously understood:

'First the dislocation of sex from procreation, secondly the dislocation of sex from marriage, thirdly the dislocation of sex from partnership, and fourthly the dislocation of sex from the biological sex of the body. These dislocations need to be sketched on a century-wide canvas of change, but they culminated in major changes in family life by the turn of the century.'

The dislocation of sex from a committed relationship has increased the pressure, especially on teenagers and young people, to engage in sexual intimacy often before either partner has considered the implications and potential consequences of having multiple sexual partners or unplanned or unwanted pregnancies. Perry³⁰ has argued that the sexual revolution of the 1960s has encouraged a belief in the twenty-first century that sex is simply a leisure activity, rather than an expression of love in a committed relationship. Furthermore, the portrayal of sexual behaviour and relationships in popular culture suggests that having a great deal of casual sex is normal and does not

²⁹ ibid

³⁰ Perry, L., (2022) *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution: A new guide to sex in the 21st century*, Polity

³¹ Perry op.cit p78-79

³² Garcia, J, R, (2012) Sexual hook-up culture: a review; *Review of General Psychology*, 16, 161-176

³³ Perry op.cit p 81

³⁴ Williams, op.cit.

procreation and thereby emancipating women from the patriarchal structures of marriage.'

Non-marital relationships have come to be seen as socially acceptable contexts for sexual activity and indeed for procreation itself. It highlights a shift in cultural expectation from marriage as the primary setting for sexual intimacy and commitment to marriage, as one setting among others. The dislodging of marriage from its former setting within culture also changes the overall meaning of marriage per se. Williams also points to the linguistic shift from 'spouse' to the more inclusive language of 'partner' and suggests that the ideology of partnership is not the same as a covenantal understanding of marriage. Partners form a mutual contract, to stay together for as long as it is mutually advantageous for both parties to do so:

'Promises and covenants inherently anticipate certain futures whereas contracts try to rule out uncertainty and to provide caveats for extraneous circumstances. The idea of partnership relies on a concept of relationship that requires certain conditions to be met in an ongoing way.'

Historically, the marriage narrative has undoubtedly changed but, as we have seen from our Call for Evidence, there is overwhelming agreement about the centrality of family, the importance of loving and being loved, and of belonging. There appears to be a conundrum in that sexual behaviour and procreation have been dislocated from marriage, yet it is marriage which still appears to be a valued goal. However we live our lives, dependency on others is an inescapable dimension of what it means to be

human. We are by nature social beings who need one another. God made us to be interdependent, not independent.

We believe that the family is and will continue to be the primary site in which human dependency, love and belonging are found. Our everyday language continues to speak of 'finding the right person' and 'falling in love' as a prerequisite to forming a committed couple partnership, often through marriage. Hence this story of love gives hope for a bold, reimagined future.

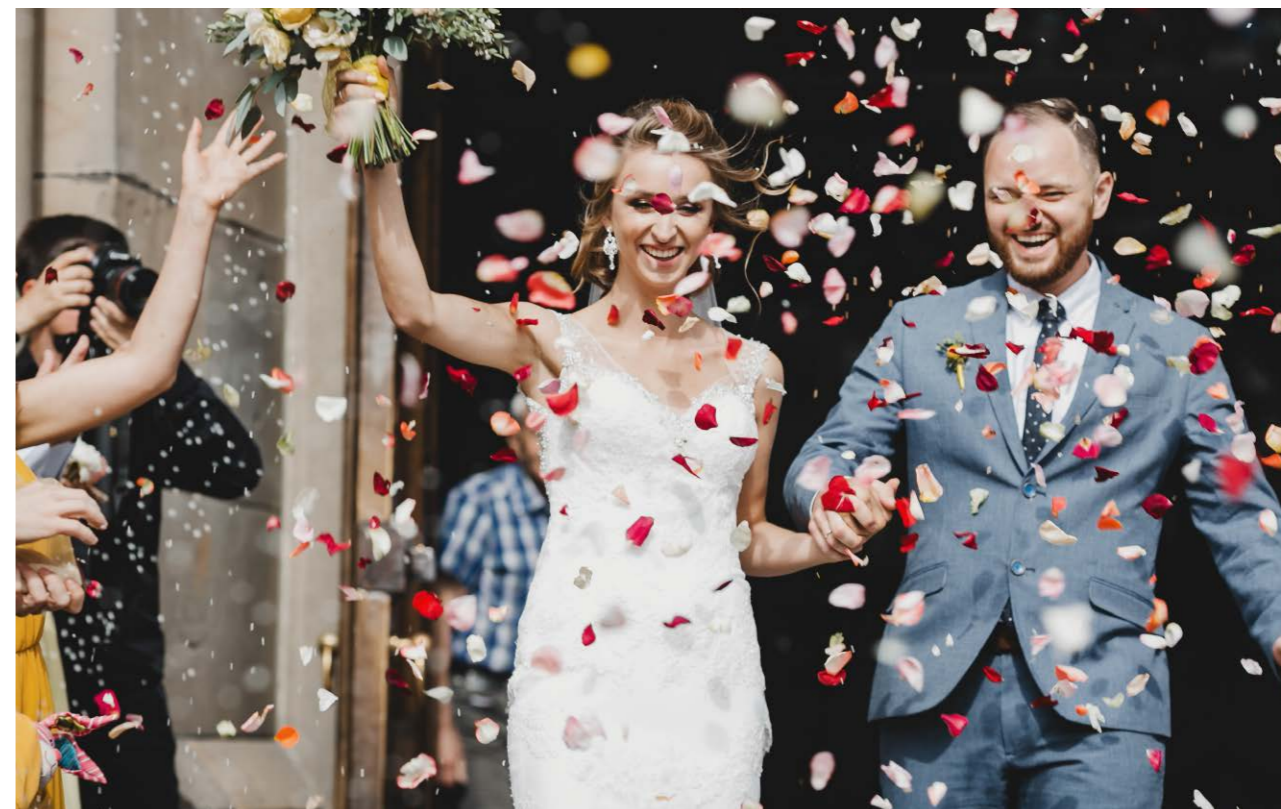
Despite the almost complete loss of social stigma, outside faith communities, of living together in a cohabiting partnership and raising children, and despite the dislocations within the marriage relationship, marriage is still viewed by many as a positive option, especially if there are children, and the symbolic importance has remained high.³⁵ Marriage remains the partnership of choice for the majority of couples in the UK at some stage in their lives. Nevertheless, there continues to be a clear distinction between civil and religious approaches to marriage and civil partnerships. Faith groups have taken different positions about marriage and who is allowed to marry within their places of worship.

Marriage and religion

'Believing that God is love, Christians have seen marriage as a gift of God in which God's life-giving love can be known.'³⁶

Marriage, as the Church of England came to understand it, has a long history of development:

'Mutual society, help and comfort run like a golden thread through the liturgies of the Church, ancient and modern.'³⁷



Theologically, scripture and tradition combine to present a positive view of marriage as being about fidelity and life-long commitment, as well as for the procreation and raising of children, and is regarded as the foundation of family life:

'There is something compelling and enriching about a notion of someone to come alongside the other; stressing the importance of shared endeavours and not being alone.'³⁸

The dislocation in society of sexual intimacy from marriage highlights that the procreation of children is not the exclusive remit of married couples, some of whom remain childless for a variety of reasons, while others choose to foster or adopt children in need of a loving home. Many couples in a civil partnership and those who cohabit also have children. Williams

has suggested that the dislocation of sex from procreation at a social, cultural and a theological level is both radical in historical terms and vast in its consequences, reflective of a fundamental shift in perceptions of the meaning of sexual intimacy and the overall purpose of sexual partnership.

When marriage is mentioned in the Bible, it is often used as a metaphor for the relationship between God and God's people. The Song of Songs reflects something of the goodness of desire and intimacy which is humanly recognisable, but the poetic images reach beyond the sensual to speak of the divine-human relationship.³⁹ One particular example is the way Mary Magdalene seeks and longs for her risen Lord.⁴⁰ Elsewhere, the prophets use human experience of marriage

³⁵ Noack, T., Bernhardt, E., and Wiik, K., (2014) *Cohabitation or Marriage? Contemporary Living Arrangements in the West*. In. Abela and Walker (eds) op.cit.

³⁶ Church of England *Living in Love and Faith: Christian teaching and learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage* p37

³⁷ ibid

³⁸ Gittoes. op.cit.

³⁹ Song of Songs 4: 8-12

⁴⁰ Song of Songs 5: 8 and John 20:15

in vivid ways.⁴¹ The language of marriage is used to evoke the call to fidelity which is our response, individually and collectively, to God's faithfulness.

When God's people fail to seek justice and loving mercy, they are described as an unfaithful spouse or as a bride forgetting the beauty of her attire. Such language and imagery are rooted in the covenantal, rather than solely contractual, nature of marriage. Covenants are about people, not just legal status. Marriages cannot be broken without broken hearts – this is true for the human heart as well as the heart of God when a covenant is broken. As a metaphor of ways of relating, marriage evokes intimacy and faithfulness, but also ways of living which reflect obedience to commandments which shape and strengthen social life.

Jesus' presence at a wedding ceremony becomes an expression of God's desire to bless, adorn and beautify the holy estate of matrimony.⁴² The glory revealed in water made wine also signals that in him there is renewal and reconciliation between humanity and Godself. Writing to early Christian communities, Paul and others place value on marriage and fidelity alongside recognising the dignity of those who are widowed or single.⁴³ There is a richness and interdependence of life together which demands intimacy, fidelity and maturity across different ways of life. It highlights the public commitment and community nature of marriage. Marriage is not solely about 'the couple' but about how their life together is for the enrichment of the whole of society.

Scripture ends with images of bride and bridegroom in the book, Revelation.⁴⁴ The language is full of beauty, anticipation and invitation to share in the abundance of a world renewed, a new creation. This communion of love between people and God is described through the lens of the love and intimacy of marriage. However, flowing from such a powerful symbol of covenant is a generous, inclusive offer which meets the needs of others: the Spirit and the bride say 'come', if you thirst take the water of life as a gift.⁴⁵

Since 2017, the Living in Love and Faith (LLF) consultation within the Church of England has been examining Christian teaching and learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage. Commission members engaged with the LLF literature, including the rich Christian history,⁴⁶ and liaised closely with the LLF team throughout the life of the Commission. We share our findings regarding the issues and dilemmas facing the church which impact on families and households, but have not commented on the LLF deliberations and recommendations in our report as the LLF process continues.

Looking at marriage in England today, we note a mixed picture in respect of the marriage of same-sex partners, who have been permitted to marry in a civil ceremony in England and Wales since March 2014. In 2021, The Methodist Church adopted a dual definition of marriage, which enables same-sex couples to marry in a religious ceremony. Each church has to decide if it wishes to conduct marriages of partners of the same sex. If a church wishes

⁴¹ Jeremiah 2:2 and Hosea 1:2

⁴² John 2:1-11

⁴³ 1 Corinthians 7

⁴⁴ Revelation 21:2

⁴⁵ Revelation 21:17

⁴⁶ Living in Love and Faith op.cit.

to conduct these marriages it must register to do so. If it is not registered, then marriages of same-sex partners cannot take place in that church. Freedom of Conscience clauses apply to ministers in the Methodist Church with respect to conducting these marriages. Marriage of a couple of the same sex is also permitted by the Scottish Episcopal Church, the United Reformed Church and the Quakers. The Church of England does not permit same-sex partners to marry in a religious ceremony, but proposals for prayers for those who have entered a same-sex partnership are being considered as we complete our work.

Looking through our historical lens we see that same-sex relationships have been a present feature of most societies in different ways and to different degrees throughout history, but cultural perceptions have undoubtedly changed. Williams⁴⁷ indicates that much has changed over time: the meanings attached to same-sex relationships have changed, as have the self-understandings of those who engage in sexual relations with members of the same biological sex. Laws have changed along with the language used to describe and imagine sexual relationships in the widest sense. For example, the use of the descriptor 'gay' signalled a significant change in how homosexuality is understood. This word was introduced to express the idea of sexual multiformity. The Commission recognised the complexity of the issues and the importance of considering them within a historical framework.

When we seek to understand complex issues in society, we need to understand the cultural shifts which influence them. Discussions about sexuality, gender and identity will continue as we look to find ways in our society to promote

strong, stable partnerships and family life that is bound by love and kindness. In our Call for Evidence we heard a strong endorsement from many of the importance and centrality of marriage as it has been traditionally understood within family life and within the Church of England, and an equally strong call for the Church of England to recognise the legitimacy of all kinds of couple relationships, to be more inclusive in its approach to same-sex couples, and more accepting of diversity.⁴⁸ The deep divisions were illustrated by responses such as the following:⁴⁹

'God designed marriage as a committed and lifelong relationship between a man and a woman in which children are born and brought up according to the principles found in the Bible. Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4 - 7.'

'My faith leads me to be as supportive as possible of all people, in all kinds of relationships, and to seek to ensure all people are included and treated equally, and have the benefit of (for example) marriage to support their relationships.'

Views about an equality in approach were underpinned in our Call for Evidence by a belief that marriage embodies core values which bolster committed couple relationships and family stability, and that it encourages the unconditional love which individuals and families need to flourish. The following comment is typical of many:

'All religions promote family life. The Christian faith is based on all belonging to the family of God and should be accepting, supportive and inclusive.'

⁴⁷ Williams, op.cit

⁴⁸ Walker, J., (2022) *Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Three Couple Relationships: the role of marriage today and indicators of commitment*. Briefing Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁴⁹ See Walker, J., and Knights, C., (2022) *Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence Briefing Paper Fourteen. Learning from Christian and other faith traditions about how couples, parents and children can be supported to flourish*, for a more in-depth exploration of the responses. Briefing Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

We found a clear consensus that while marriage is an extremely important foundation on which to build stable families and a stable society, it is not the only family form that can achieve this:

'Marriage can be key in promoting and sustaining stability and a commitment in a loving and mutually supportive relationship, although there are plenty of examples of non-married, committed relationships and single parent families which are strong, thriving, nurturing and supportive. Also plenty of examples where marriages are toxic and unhealthy.'⁵⁰

A clear distinctiveness about marriage remains, however. Marriage still represents an important rite of passage which publicly recognises statements of life-long commitment between the partners. The public affirmation in the marriage ceremony of a private commitment and the making of promises is among the factors which continue to lead couples to choose marriage over cohabitation. Marriage is seen by many as central to a Christian framework of family life, and an important tenet of that is the public expression of commitment it requires:

'The act of marriage ... a clear decision by both parties, an agreed plan for the future, a mutual and unambiguous signal of intent, the removal of lingering doubt or ambiguity, the public declaration of commitment in front of family and friends, and the affirmation, social support and recognition of those family and friends.'⁵¹

Religious beliefs are significant in the choice to marry for many couples who would not be comfortable living in a non-traditional relationship and raising children outside a

partnership which is sanctioned by their faith.⁵² Families with no religion have the highest percentage of cohabiting partners (23%), twice as many as Christian families, and considerably more than those from other religions.

A recent analysis of the *Annual Population Survey 2020* data⁵³ illustrates how the choices couples make vary by differences in ethnicity, religion and economic status. Families of Asian descent are much more likely to be married or in a civil partnership, while Black Caribbean and Black African families are significantly more likely to be lone parents.⁵⁴ While the percentage of lone parents is similar across most religions, the percentage of couples who are married is higher among families who declare themselves to be religious. For example, in 91 per cent of Hindu families, 83 per cent of Sikh families, 79 per cent of both Muslim and Jewish families, and in 64 per cent of Christian families, the partners are married or in a civil partnership, compared with 55 per cent of couples in non-religious families. In the 2021 census (England and Wales), less than half of the population (46.2%), described themselves as Christian, a 13.1 percentage point decrease from 2011; 37.2 per cent described themselves as having no religion, (an increase of 12%); and there were increases in those describing themselves as either Muslim or Hindu.⁵⁵

Marriage and weddings

Although the Bible contains diverse stories of marriages, accounts of wedding ceremonies are scarce and brief. Isaac married Rebekah after Abraham's servant had acted as a go-between or match-maker to find a suitable bride from their



The wedding of Zuhair and Farha, who met at the Birmingham Matchmaker's Forum

own kindred.⁵⁶ There is more detail devoted to the wealth and ornaments presented, and the terms by which the marriage was arranged, than the wedding ceremony itself. When they meet, Rebekah puts on a veil and enters Isaac's mother's tent. She becomes his wife and he loves her. She brings him comfort in grief as well as bearing children. Even one of the most well-known weddings in the Bible, between Boaz and Ruth, contains few details.⁵⁷ There is a long deliberation between Boaz and the elders concerning land and inheritance before the transaction is completed. It is witnessed and blessings for children expressed before Boaz takes Ruth as his wife. She conceives and it is the birth of a son which restores hope and life for the family line.

So while we have no biblical template for 'a wedding', the underlying concerns are familiar:

negotiating with in-laws and family traditions/identity; the need for witnesses and the desire for blessing; love, comfort and the hope of children; inheritance, legacy and continuity. The majority of couples now enter into marriage without family arrangement - marrying for love and companionship - but that represents a shift within our own social history. To echo the Song of Songs, weddings are a crown upon the head, a public event with social implications, but also a seal upon the heart (a more private or personal affection, love and intimacy). Whether in formal liturgy or personalised vows, private feelings are made public in declarations of love, hopes for the future and comfort in adversity.

Weddings feature within Jesus' teaching. In some, Jesus is the bridegroom and God's people are the bride, echoing the marriage imagery from the Old Testament writings and prophets.⁵⁸

⁵⁰ This and other extracts are direct responses from those who contributed to the Call for Evidence.

⁵¹ Contribution to the Call for Evidence: Briefing Three op.cit.

⁵² Pryor, J., (2014) Marriage and Divorce in the Western World. In Abela and Walker (eds) op.cit.

⁵³ Children's Commissioner (2022) Family Review Part 1: Family and its protective effect

⁵⁴ Children's Commissioner (2022) op.cit. p18

⁵⁵ ONS (2022) Religion England and Wales: 2021 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021>

⁵⁶ Genesis 24

⁵⁷ Ruth 4

⁵⁸ Mark 2 19-20

In others, the focus is on the idea of a wedding feast as a means of exploring social life within the realm of God's love. There is anticipation and preparation as bridesmaids wait for the bridegroom; there is rejoicing in his presence.⁵⁹ There is a radically inclusive turn when it comes to the banquet itself, for when invited guests make their excuses, those on the margins or in need find themselves made welcome instead.⁶⁰ Indeed, in the most famous wedding of all, the couple are not the centre of attention.⁶¹ Jesus is there in the joyous social gathering, but he is also there when the wine runs out. There is grace and abundance when human resources are depleted. At the heart of that exuberant party, God's glory is revealed.

Wedding ceremonies and celebrations differ across religions and countries. We were told about the lengthy celebrations within the Muslim tradition, for example, which compares to the briefer ceremonies and celebrations within the Church of England. The number of couples choosing a religious ceremony is decreasing, however. In 2019 in England religious ceremonies accounted for less than one in five (18.7%) of opposite-sex marriages, a decrease from 21.1 per cent in 2018 and the lowest percentage on record; and 0.7 per cent of the marriages of same-sex couples.⁶²

In popular culture today, there has been a growth in the 'wedding industry' with plenty of organisations offering advice, bespoke wedding packages, and wedding planners, all designed to ensure that the great day is as wonderful and perfect as it can be. While these organisations can be helpful in relieving some of the strain of the preparations from the couple themselves or their families, they can also serve to increase

the cost and place the focus on the wedding day itself rather than on its key purpose, which is the solemnisation of marriage or civil partnership. Many people suggested that the Church of England, other churches and faith communities can play a major role in the 'wedding industry' by resetting the balance and focusing on the couple themselves and the promises they are about to make to each other.

In July 2022 The Law Reform Commission published its recommendations for the reform of weddings,⁶³ including the proposal to transform the law from a system based on regulation of buildings to one based on regulation of the officiant responsible for the ceremony. All couples, as well as all religious groups and (if enabled by the Government to conduct weddings) non-religious belief groups, would have the freedom to decide where and how their weddings will take place. The Law Commission has recommended that couples should be able to have a religious wedding ceremony in a venue other than a place of worship; and a civil wedding that incorporates some religious elements.⁶⁴

The Law Commission has also recommended that couples should be able to get married in a much wider variety of locations, such as in a forest, on a beach, or in their own home. During the coronavirus pandemic restrictions, civil wedding ceremonies were permitted in open-air settings in the grounds of approved premises and this permission is set to continue indefinitely. However, a Christian marriage service in the Church of England is still restricted to taking place within church buildings. The Government has indicated that it intends to put forward a Legislative Review Order to allow for

outdoor religious weddings. Religious bodies, however, will be able to retain or set rules determining where its own weddings can take place.

In its report, the Law Commission states that the current law is ancient, complex, inconsistent, inefficient, unfair and restrictive, hence the need for change. Some of the proposals have raised initial concerns and faith and other groups have much to think about.⁶⁵ The Church of England has expressed its clear concern with a number of the proposals, and these concerns are shared by others, including Humanists UK. We noted that both the Church of England and Humanists UK object primarily to the underlying commercialisation of weddings indicated in the recommendations. Moreover, there appears to be a focus on weddings without seeing the wedding in terms of the marriage itself and the married life that follows. The questions to be considered are not simply about religious faith.

New legislation from February 2023 raises the age at which young people can enter a legal partnership to 18, reflecting a strong concern that the law should not allow children to enter into marriage under any circumstances.⁶⁶ Child marriage is often associated with leaving education early, limited career and vocational opportunities, serious physical and mental health problems, developmental difficulties for the children born to young mothers, and an increased risk of domestic abuse.⁶⁷ It is a criminal offence in England and Wales to cause a child to marry before they turn 18 and illegal to take a child abroad to marry. This legislation offers new protection for children and asserts societal expectations about young people staying in education or training through their teens, and couples taking a committed

relationship seriously.

We note, however, that this change in the age of marriage has legally separated it from the legal age for sexual intercourse, which remains at sixteen. This is a significant change from our long history of keeping these in step with one another. It legally implies that sex before marriage is acceptable in a way that it was not legally until now. For those who continue to hold, for religious reasons across faiths, or for other philosophical or moral reasons, that the two should always be in step, this is a point of concern. It is another example of the dislocation of sexual behaviour from marriage.

Our conversations with young people from all backgrounds and ethnicities revealed that marriage is still a long-term aspiration for many, although some are hesitant about whether this will be something they do. The majority hope that they will have a healthy, happy family life with children of their own in future which might, but not necessarily, include getting married at some stage. Establishing a career, being financially independent and meeting people who share the same interests and values are important objectives for many young people before they settle down to form a committed partnership and raise children. Not surprisingly, then, the majority will have experienced sexual relationships long before they marry or enter a civil partnership. We were told that:

'young people consider concepts of healthy commitment and positive relationship ambition as central to their lives now and in the future.'⁶⁸

All the evidence suggests that faith groups have a very significant role to play in promoting and supporting marriage, as well as drawing on the

⁵⁹ Matthew 25:1-13

⁶⁰ Luke 14: 8-23

⁶¹ John 2: 1-11

⁶² ONS (2022) *Marriages in England* 2019 op.cit.

⁶³ <https://www.lawcom.gov.uk/project/weddings/>

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ House of Commons *Research Briefing: Marriage Venues*, 30 November 2022

⁶⁶ Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022

⁶⁷ World Bank Document "ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE: (CONFERENCE EDITION) JUNE 2017 GLOBAL SYNTHESIS REPORT" page 53-65 3 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/>

⁶⁸ Commission conversation with Fastn <https://www.fastn.org/youth-programmes>

beliefs and values of Christian and other faiths to support all kinds of couple relationships to flourish. Several people warned that if the Church of England does not support everyone who wishes to marry then couples will be alienated from faith:

'We will alienate more people who would like to enter into committed lifelong partnerships unless we recognise that loving partnerships are all valid, regardless of sexual orientation.'

Valuing singleness

Celebrating diversity must also include recognition of the fact that many adults are not living in an intimate couple relationship. A growing number of people are single and not living within a family group or in a couple relationship: through personal choice, because they have not yet met a life-partner, or are single through separation, divorce or death. The overwhelming evidence given to the Commission is that everyone, whether married, cohabiting or single, should be valued and supported to flourish:

'My faith says single men and women should be as valued in their own rights as married people. Single isn't second best, whether it is an active choice or happenstance. My faith reminds me that Jesus, the only perfect human, remained single yet died completely fulfilled.'⁶⁹

There is a strong emphasis on not regarding singleness as somehow 'lesser' than living in a family unit with children:

'My faith leads me to be deeply committed to the flourishing of all single people (a huge group who are often marginalised in the church).'

Commission members met with members of the Chemin Neuf community, and the Community of St Anselm (CoSA) residing at Lambeth Palace, to learn about their commitment to valuing singleness:

'The Chemin Neuf models both single person and celibate person flourishing very powerfully, by celebrating the value of different relational statuses.'

Chemin Neuf is a diverse community of men and women from different denominations and countries, with a specific call to love, pray, and work for unity. People take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, all of which tie community members to one another in 'family' relationships. The aim of community life is to surround each household unit in love, including married couples, children, single people, and consecrated celibate priests, and to encourage truth, transparency and trust in relationships.

The Community of St Anselm (CoSA), was established by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2015 for young people aged between 20 and 35. They serve in a community of prayer and monastic-inspired life, valuing the idea of a 'found family', in which people create family ties with others to whom they are not related. The communities of Chemin Neuf and St Anselm think about single life in all of its diversity in a nuanced way, placing a very high value on singleness.



Community of St Anselm

Commission Members were delighted to meet with members of the Community of St Anselm (CoSA), an ecumenical, international community based at Lambeth Palace made up of Christians aged 20-35. The Community is a one-year experience of monastic life. The members shared with us the verses that underpin the sense of shared life among members:

'I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: love each other.' (John 15: 15-17)

Many of the people who join CoSA are particularly interested in finding relationships of integrity, to think deeply about how to live faithful, relational lives with one another. The conversation with CoSA members focused on:

- The importance of being part of a community of people, and the way in which belief in Jesus Christ can form the basis of community.
- The idea of a 'found family', one in which people create close ties with people to whom they are not related, and where their actions affect the people around them.
- The need for the Church to have a better understanding of singleness and single people.

⁶⁹ See: Walker, J. and Knights, M., (2022) Briefing Paper Thirteen op.cit.

Being single does not restrict anyone's access to being loved and nurtured, however. Nor does singleness imply celibacy. The choice to remain single does not deny the enjoyment of a sexual relationship, but it might indicate a wish to avoid being committed in a permanent couple relationship, preferring the freedom which staying single can offer.

Single celibacy, however, has long been associated with a total commitment to God, being married to the church and sharing a bond of loving kindness with those who have chosen the same way of life:

'Many in our church history have remained single to enable them to be whole-hearted for God. Single people are valuable in themselves, loved and chosen by God.'

We are reminded that Jesus never married and remained single throughout his life. This was unusual as it was expected at that time that everyone would marry. As Paul Butler has pointed out, being married was important both for mutual care and support and raising children to maintain the family line:⁷⁰

'Jesus fulfils his divine calling entirely as a single person, rooted in family and community, yet also in many ways estranged from it.'

This commitment to God takes priority over a commitment to family.⁷¹ Marriage is not necessary to be 'complete', but relationships with others certainly are – single people are still family people:

'We believe that Jesus teaches about family being more than your biological family: Mark 3: 31-35. Whoever does God's will is my brother, sister and mother. Family

relationships are so very important but those relationships are intended to extend past the nuclear family, giving space for singles to belong in broader family relationships, (committed long-term bonds that give security and last through life's challenges). Singleness is not inferior to marriage, both are a gift. Our culture and the church can idolise romantic relationships and marriage, making those who aren't in one feel inferior.'⁷²

Paul Butler suggests that Jesus' own singleness

'ought to ensure that we absolutely hold the value of the single life and its completeness in its own right alongside the equal value of married life for those who choose it.'⁷³

As a Commission we believe that it is essential that singleness, in whatever circumstances and for whatever reason it has arisen,

'must be seen as having a full place in the life of our society.'⁷⁴

We have heard how hurtful it can be when assumptions about the primacy of living in a family group or having an intimate partner lead to conversations and questions about someone's marital status that appear to suggest that being single is less desirable and other family forms are superior. Language matters and we encourage the development of a narrative which acknowledges the rich diversity in families and households, and recognises that there are growing numbers of people who are single.

Single Friendly Church was formed over a decade ago to support single people from all Christian denominations. The organisation provides resources and, in 2020, launched an

Singleness in the Bible⁷⁵

A figure from Hebrew scriptures might offer ways of thinking which resonate with contemporary circumstances. At the opening of the book that bears his name, Jeremiah is called to be a prophet. His youth is mentioned, without caveats or expectations - he responds to God's call.

Later, he is told not to marry or have children. There may well be something recognisable about the shifting circumstances increasing numbers of men and women find themselves in - not because of a choice or commitment made in youth, but in response to changing circumstances, demands and opportunities. It might encourage us to think of ways of cultivating a mature sense of self - that is neither selfish or self-reliant but perhaps satisfying and sustaining.

Such an expression of self (rather than constructed self-expression) serves as a basis for healthy relationships. There are also ways in which those who are single contribute in a valuable way to the common good. Again, we can turn back to Jeremiah: in chapter 29, he writes about rebuilding a people. He is single - and childfree or childless - and also has a place in shaping society. How we support and strengthen single-person households is a vital part of a social and theological vision for society.

audit tool for churches⁷⁶ to use to look at key areas of church life including the language that is used: for example, the overuse of the word 'family' in churches can give signals which can be read as not welcoming people who are single or childless. Terms such as 'family-friendly' can be alienating for people without children and those who live alone. They must be used with great care.

Recognising the indicators of commitment

'Stability is required for couples and singles, children and elderly: a faithful and fruitful way of relating across life.'⁷⁷

The importance of commitment has been a constant theme in our work. We wanted to understand what 'commitment' looks like and the indicators that exemplify it. By understanding these, programmes which aim to support marriage and couple relationships of all kinds might be better tailored and more readily sought. We found a high level of consensus in our Call for Evidence about the indicators of commitment which are relevant to all kinds of couple relationships;⁷⁸

'Love, trust, shared lives, shared values, engagement with each other and with others outside the relationship (both together and singly).'

⁷⁰ Butler, P., (2022) *Pursuing the Holy Family*. Theology Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁷¹ Strawbridge. op.cit.

⁷² See, Call for Evidence, Briefing 13, op.cit

⁷³ Butler, op.cit

⁷⁴ ibid.

⁷⁵ See: <https://www.singlefriendlychurch.com/become-single-freindly/5-steps>

⁷⁵ Gittoes.op.cit.

⁷⁶ See: <https://www.singlefriendlychurch.com/become-single-freindly/5-steps>

⁷⁷ Gittoes, op.cit.

⁷⁸ See Briefing Paper Three op.cit.

Yet again, 'love' is the indicator referenced the most, with 'respect' being the next most frequently mentioned. Mutuality is referred to as critical to ensuring that these indicators are a shared experience:

'Mutual respect and care for one another, sexual faithfulness, sharing a life and being part of a wider family or community.'

The practice of 'sharing' emerged as a key indicator for building a committed life together. The exclusivity of a couple relationship within marriage, a civil partnership and in cohabitation, alongside fidelity and loyalty, were also regarded as key indicators of commitment.

There remains a sense within society that cohabitation indicates a lack of commitment. In our Call for Evidence some people commented that the level of commitment in any relationship is not always understood or acknowledged, especially when couples choose not to marry. As a consequence, if generalisations are made about cohabiting relationships being less committed, the support which couples in all kinds of relationships might need at different stages may not be readily forthcoming.

Most people enter marriage or a civil partnership having already experienced sexual relationships, and increasing numbers of children are born to cohabiting parents. As we have seen, some cohabiting couples delay marriage while they save for a house, secure stable employment, settle down as a couple, while others deliberately choose cohabitation as their preferred way of living. Whatever the drivers, these realities have important implications for the ways in which couples are prepared for a long-term committed relationship and the support that can be provided by the church and the state at various stages of, and transitions in, family life. It is difficult to locate the points at which relationship preparation might be offered

at the start of a cohabiting relationship.

Many people pointed to the importance of being realistic about the challenges of sustaining a long-term committed, exclusive partnership in marriage as well as in cohabiting partnerships. Life expectancy is considerably greater than in times past and more married couples celebrate their golden wedding anniversary than previously. Promising to maintain a loving, committed relationship until death signifies a much longer commitment today than for previous generations, and one which has to weather a number of challenges over the decades.

While the key indicators of commitment remain the same during the life-course, understanding the longer-term changes and challenges is essential if couples are to be better prepared and supported. This means openly acknowledging that relationships can be difficult, that a loving and committed relationship is not a fairy tale, and it is necessary to make compromises. For some couples this proves to be too difficult and previously committed relationships end.

Challenges to commitment

Three key stressors have been indicated during the Commission's work, all of which have been previously documented: partners entering a committed relationship with unrealistic expectations; the transition to parenthood; and the pressures of money worries and establishing a work-life balance.

Unrealistic expectations

Studies of relationship breakdown suggest that it is not unusual for couples to enter into a committed relationship with unrealistic expectations, fully expecting that romantic love is a guarantee for a 'happy-ever-after' family life.⁷⁹ Not everyone entering a committed

relationship has explored their partner's beliefs, ambitions, and expectations, such as becoming parents for example. To a large extent our own expectations are influenced by our family of origin, our childhood experiences and the values we have absorbed. Religious affiliation can be particularly influential in creating certain expectations of an intimate couple relationship. We were frequently told about the lack of preparation for marriage and for creating a loving life together that had left people with unrealistic expectations, and an inability to find appropriate advice or seek help.

The transition to parenthood

It is widely recognised that the transition to parenthood is one of the biggest challenges that a couple may face.⁸⁰ Problems associated with pregnancy, miscarriage, premature birth, post-natal stress, male and female infertility, and depression can place considerable strain on the couple relationship. We know that fathers as well as mothers can experience post-natal depression. The loss of a baby or a child is devastating. It can be an experience which men and women often respond to differently, sometimes driving partners apart.

Financial and time pressures

In society today there is increased pressure on both partners in a family to contribute to the household income and for families to be economically self-sufficient. The everyday pressures of work and the need to make enough money often limit the opportunities for a couple to spend quality time together. The following comment in the Call for Evidence was typical of many:

'The challenge for a couple to get any time to spend on their relationship is huge ... These challenges can put a strain on relationships and test levels of commitment.'

We look in more depth at the impact of the current cost of living crisis and the economic and work pressures on relationships in Chapter 8.

Multiple stresses

Other life events, issues and situations which are known to challenge couple relationships include: ill-health and bereavement; disability; caring for a sick child, partner or elderly relative; alcohol abuse; domestic abuse; infidelity and difficulties with sexual intimacy. Frequently, stresses pile up and it is difficult to know how to deal with any one of them. Talking about these stresses can be difficult and they often lead to recurring arguments at home and, eventually to the deterioration of all constructive communication between partners.

Accepting diversity and the challenges in family life: the role of the church?

'Treat all families with fairness and equality, tailored to their individual needs and requirements. Communicate and listen to the families with respect, dignity, kindness, humility and compassion.'⁸¹

Diversity in family structures continues to offer opportunities to seek the love, warmth, commitment and connectedness that bind people together and which encourage human flourishing at all life stages:

⁸⁰ See, for example, Mansfield, P., and Collard, J., (1988) *The Beginning of the rest of your life: a portrait of newly-wed marriage*, Macmillan; Centre for Social Justice (2012) *Forgotten Families? The vanishing agenda*. CSJ; Walker, J., (2013) Partnership and Parenting, in M. Davies (ed) *Blackwell Companion to Social Work* pp109-120

⁸¹ Contributor to the Call for Evidence Briefing Fifteen

⁷⁹ Walker et al (2010) op.cit.

'The idea that we are not independent but interdependent is hugely important, as is the rejection of any sense that being married or having children is a superior vocation, faith in Jesus and wanting to follow in his footsteps causes us to treat people with dignity and love as every human being is made in the image of God.'⁸²

Our evidence draws attention to the disconnect between societal acceptance of the changes in family life and an apparent lack of acceptance among some faith communities. Many people were critical of the Church of England and pointed to a perceived inability to accept and adapt to the varied choices about how to live one's life.⁸³ Concerns were expressed that some churches do not always value different family forms and are frequently judgemental. This view is summed up in the following comments:

'Being loved and able to love should be something all people can and do experience. Sadly too often the Christian church has a very narrow-minded idea and approach to what relationships can and should look like that I believe can be harmful to people and reduce their personhood ... The church also needs to support single people more confidently and not just assume everyone wants or needs to get married and/or have children.'

'Churches that support the realities of marriages instead of holding up some perfect picture that we can never live up to is so important. Divorce, remarriage, same-sex marriage is part of our society and we should not exclude people from our faith by making them feel they are wrong, broken or failed.'

We heard personal experiences from people who had struggled with their relationship and from those who were divorced feeling unwelcome in their church and judged for their 'failure'. Some had left the church as a result. Others commented that the declining numbers attending a church is symbolic of an institution which fails to understand and acknowledge the diversity of family life today:

'A healthy church is one where mutual, honest, open, forgiving and wise relationships are modelled, spoken about and encouraged. Where hope for all brokenness to be redeemed is offered, and where wise care and counsel about what is unhealthy, abusive and coercive in relationships is given.'

We heard that the Church of England often conveys an expectation of marriage which is not present in society, and that there is too much focus on marriage and family in the church community, especially as increasing numbers of people are choosing to remain single. They drew attention to the assumptions that only heterosexual couples with children are acceptable in many churches.

Many people spoke about the sense of loneliness that can accompany being single in church:

'In this strongly individualistic age the single life can be very lonely. The Church can and should provide a safe, chaste, as well as warm and welcoming place for single people to discover and use their God given gifts in God's service.'

We heard from people who identify as LGBTQI+, as well as those who are single, that they feel a stigma in church from not being in a 'conventional' household. A number of LGBTQI+ people, some of them priests in the Church of

WELCOME TO COVENTRY CATHEDRAL

We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, widowed, straight, gay, questioning, well-heeled or down at heel. We especially welcome wailing babies and excited toddlers.

You're welcome here if you're just browsing, just woken up, or just out of prison. We don't care if you're more Christian than the Archbishop of Canterbury or haven't been to church since Christmas ten years ago.

We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet, and to teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome keep-fit mums, football dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegans, junk-food eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We welcome you if you're having problems, are down in the dumps or don't like organised religion (we're not that keen on it either!).

We offer a welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't spell, or are here because granny is visiting and wanted to look round. We welcome those who are inked, pierced, both, or neither. We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down their throats as kids, or got lost on the ring road and wound up here by mistake.

We welcome pilgrims, tourists, seekers, doubters - and especially you...

PLEASE COME IN!



England, told the Commission that it is important for them to find churches which will welcome them. Some described their fear about moving to a parish in which they will be unwelcome because of their sexuality and/or gender. We heard how difficult it is as a Christian to 'come out' because of the potential repercussions, and that some choose to make costly and painful decisions because not to do so could be even more costly and painful. For example, it can feel necessary to live somewhat in hiding, not correcting the usual public assumption that they are straight:

'There are multiple layers of fear: fear of losing my job; fear of losing my house; fear of rejection; fear of undermining family wellbeing. Life can be made very hard.'

We heard from gay people who had married a partner of the opposite sex to be seen to be 'respectable' and to be accepted as a Christian. This can bring a sense of guilt and grief for a lost life, although some people have written about finding strength and commitment in an opposite sex marriage despite being 'gay'.⁸⁴ Members of the LGBTQI+ community told us that they welcomed the initiative in Oxford diocese to appoint a Social Justice Adviser and a LGBTQIA+ Chaplaincy Service designed to:

'create a safe space where anyone can be confident that their lived experience is listened to with compassion and respect and that there is appropriate pastoral and spiritual care available.'⁸⁵

⁸² See. Call for Evidence Briefing Paper Thirteen. op.cit.

⁸³ Walker, J., (2022) *Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Ten Social Change: Experiences of change in family life, household patterns and living arrangements*; Briefing Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households. Walker, J. and Knight, C.; Walker and Knights, Briefing Thirteen, op.cit.; Walker and Knights Briefing Fourteen. op.cit

⁸⁴ Gibson, R., (2021) *My Surprising Marriage*, Living Out, April 2021; Revd. Sean Doherty Podcast, www.livingout.org/resources/podcasts/16/meet-the-authors-7-seam-doherty

⁸⁵ Diocese of Oxford www.oxford.anglican.org/environment-and-social-justice/lgbti-chaplaincy

A similar initiative in Canterbury diocese involves LGBTQIA+ Chaplains who:

'work alongside and support LGBT+ people, their families, friends, ministers and anyone with an interest in LGBT+ matters.'⁸⁶

Irrespective of the personal views and beliefs which are deeply held, we heard many pleas for more open communication in church about the variations and challenges of family life in society today: the irretrievable breakdown of some relationships, especially where there is domestic abuse; mental health conditions; and other

sensitive issues which create stigma and a sense of 'other'. The need for these issues and realities to be openly acknowledged and understood within the Church of England if the church is to be able to support everyone to flourish was voiced across different communities. Family life has changed and we heard from many people that:

'There is a disparity between what the church offers to families and where their needs have shifted and changed over the decades.'

⁸⁴ Gibson, R., (2021) *My Surprising Marriage*, Living Out, April 2021; Revd. Sean Doherty Podcast, www.livingout.org/resources/podcasts/16/meet-the-authors-7-seam-doherty

⁸⁵ Diocese of Oxford www.oxford.anglican.org/environment-and-social-justice/lgbti-chaplaincy

Key Messages from the Commission

1. Change and continuity should be seen as a story of hope and new opportunities.
2. It is critical to recognise and value all kinds of loving couple relationships. Different family structures in which strong, stable and committed loving relationships are central to everyday life should be celebrated, valuing and supporting everyone to flourish.
3. Singleness is a reality that most people face during their lives at some point. For some this can be for long periods. Singleness, whether by choice or circumstance, needs to be recognised well by society and by the Church of England, other churches and faith communities, so that single people have a full place in the life of society and our churches.
4. Marriage is still highly valued but has changed from being a universal norm to becoming a relationship to be aspired to rather than taken for granted, with promises made that are often individualised beyond the requirements of a faith-based ceremony.
5. Marriage remains the couple relationship of choice for many people, including many young people. The increased choice about whether and how to form a committed couple relationship does not necessarily undermine the institution of marriage or the nature of commitment. The role of religious beliefs and the public proclamation of commitment remain significant for many couples, and faith communities should present a clear vision of a loving marriage as a social good.
6. Commitment remains an important indicator of wellbeing and sustainability in all kinds of couple relationships. Connectedness, commitment and fidelity are core ingredients of stable couple relationships.
7. Neither marriage, civil partnership nor cohabitation can guarantee a life-long stable partnership. Family life can be difficult and messy. All relationships face challenges and can benefit from support at different life-stages. The more this is understood and appreciated by churches, faith groups, government, and society generally, the more tailored and appropriate the support that can be offered.
8. Nurturing wellbeing is becoming an increasingly important goal for individuals, for families and for society.

Recommendations

The Commission urges the Church of England:

Through all its members

To:

- Reaffirm the value and dignity of every human being.
- Honour and celebrate singleness, whether through choice or circumstance, and recognise the full place of single people within the Church and society.
- Enable and support people to talk openly and honestly about sensitive and difficult issues, including domestic abuse, separation and divorce, mental health, and relationships.
This could be done by promoting a series of Synod debates highlighting good practice in each area and recommending that others develop similar practices.
- Challenge attitudes and behaviours anywhere in the life of the Church which undermine the value and dignity of every human being.

The Commission urges the Government to:

- Recognise and value the diversity of families and households, and to reflect this in policy and decision-making.

4. FOSTERING LOVING RELATIONSHIPS AND PROMOTING STABILITY

*'Relationships are a fundamental part of being human. They meet a profound need to give and receive love and care. Relationships are a source of security, support, and advice. They make us feel competent and valued and create a sense of shared values and interests'*¹

The Commission has focused on learning how best to support individuals, couples and families to flourish. The evidence indicates that the key to living a flourishing, stable family life is not any specific family structure, but the quality of the relationships between family members. The Children's Commissioner has reached a similar conclusion:

'There is strong evidence to suggest that the quality of relationships between family members is more important for wellbeing than family structure.'²

A range of research studies³ supports this view, requiring us to find new ways to enhance the quality of all our relationships. This does not undermine marriage as foundational in our

¹ Weiss, R. (1974). *The provisions of social relationships*. In Z. Rubin (Ed.), *Doing unto others* (pp. 17-26). Prentice Hall.

² Children's Commissioner (2022) op.cit p50.

³ See, for example: Mooney et.al. op.cit; The Children's Society (2018) *Good Childhood Report*; Harold, G. T., and Sellers, R. (2018). *Interparental Conflict and Youth Psychopathology: An Evidence Review and Practice Focused Update*. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 59(4), 374-402; Center on the Developing Child (2020) *Working Paper 15: Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience*. Harvard University.

society, but tells us that all kinds of intimate couple relationships, including marriage, and all kinds of families are capable of flourishing if their basic and emotional needs are met and loving partnerships are supported to flourish.

All families experience some if not all of the stresses that put significant strain on relationships. What matters is being prepared for the challenges and being able to deal with these constructively. This may make the difference between reconciliation and the irretrievable breakdown of family relations. In this chapter we look in some detail at the critical relationship between adults who decide to commit to a life together through marriage, civil partnership or cohabitation.

We have heard concerns expressed throughout the Commission's work about the number of relationships that end in separation or divorce and the potentially detrimental impacts on children whose parents split up. Research indicates that many partners who separate subsequently wish they had been able to find a way to save their relationship.⁴ This indicates that much more needs to be done to support all couple relationships at all stages of family life. This view was exemplified clearly and in detail in the following response to our Call for Evidence, and echoes those offered by many others:

'From every angle, the spiritual, mental, emotional, physical, and financial wellbeing of our nation is directly linked to the level of support offered to marriages and intimate couple relationships. Every relationship faces hurdles and the more intimate the relationship the more emotionally charged the hurdles and the more vital it is that people are equipped to deal with them well. Success comes from being equipped ahead of time to get over the inevitable challenges so couples can

have better conversations even through conflict situations, remain strong in their commitment and achieve better outcomes. Learning how to understand differences; use conflict to strengthen rather than damage the relationship; have tough conversations around key issues, core values and beliefs when necessary; apologise well and forgive; and intentionally invest in building warmth and emotional connection in the relationship are vital skills for couples to have in order to flourish. Proactively equipping people with essential relationship habits as a key part of personal and professional development across society must become a strategic priority to help address the costs and challenges of relationship breakdown and create a healthier society.'

The challenge for the Church of England, government and wider society is to provide the support which:

- fosters and enhances intimate couple relationships
- provides a buffer against the stressors that inevitably challenge them
- minimises the detrimental impacts and disruptive effects of separation and divorce if couples part
- maximises the protective factors that enable children, young people and their parents to recover and thrive

This challenge led the Commission to examine how everyone should be enabled to:

- build relationships well
- maintain relationships well
- work hard to hold families together in love
- disagree well
- manage conflict and reconciliation well
- value every relationship and know that relationships are precious



We explore what this means for the Church of England, other churches, faith communities, and civic society in this and following chapters.

Why do we need to build loving, caring relationships?

First, we pose an important question: why do loving, caring relationships matter? In a 75-year study of happiness, Robert Waldinger concluded that:

'the clearest message we get ... is this: good relationships keep us happier and healthier.'⁵

Human beings are made to be social and relational. From the very outset of our lives we are dependent on the relationship between mother and child in the womb; then between mother and the new born child. There is a relationship to be developed and a bond to be built between the child and the father or the other parent or carer. We know that it is deeply significant that these relationships, and others that develop with grandparents, other

significant adults and siblings, need to be loving. The growth of love is the most fundamental need of every child, alongside food and water. The lack of it, in the first 1,000 days in particular, can be devastating for the rest of that person's life. The family is the place where we primarily experience being loved (although this is not always the case) and where we learn to love. This experience expands as we grow into friendships and wider relationships. At times it becomes focused in particular special relationships. The most obvious of these is in choosing to love a lifelong partner, which has been traditionally expressed through marriage.

We are made for loving relationships: to love and be loved. Much of biblical teaching on relationships – as couples, households or communities – is rooted in the two great commandments: to love God, with all that we are – mind, heart and body; and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Fostering loving relationships is grounded in what it is to 'have the same mindset as Christ Jesus' (Philippians 2:5). This is marked by looking to the interests

⁴ Walker, J., McCarthy, P., Stark, C., and Laing, K., (2004) Picking Up the Pieces: Marriage and Divorce Two Years After Information Provision, Lord Chancellor's Department; Walker, Barrett et al (2010) et al op.cit.

⁵ Waldinger, R., (2017) 75 Year Harvard Study of Happiness <https://www.inc.com/melanie-curtin/want-a-life-of-fulfillment-a-75-year-harvard-study-says-to-prioritize-this-one-t.html>.

of others and a spirit of humility rather than selfishness or vanity. Such tenderness and compassion are nurtured through human habits of interaction as well as being seen as an expression of the Spirit's gifts (Philippians 2:1-4). As we indicated in Chapter Two, this is most famously expressed in 1 Corinthians 13 – Paul's great hymn to love.

Every human being will have a range of relationships, with differing levels of commitment and engagement. But what all healthy societies need is for truly loving relationships to be at the heart of everyone's lives.

A considerable wealth of literature argues that strong relationships matter.⁶ A body of evidence⁷ which underlines the *'profound role of relationships in health, well-being and happiness'* suggests that developing relational capability, occasionally referred to as relational intelligence and, sometimes, as emotional literacy, is a prerequisite for living a flourishing life. Relational capability combines both the ability to initiate and maintain relationships (internal capability) and the opportunities and conditions that enable individuals to form and maintain relationships (relational opportunity):

'Time and again relationships, and in particular the capacity for intimate relationships, have been found to be a key factor in explaining why some people flourish and others flounder in the face of difficulties.'⁸

If individuals do not have the ability to form and maintain relationships, they are denied access to the 'goods of life'. The building blocks of relational capability are laid down in childhood and we consider the importance of this in Chapter 6.

The research evidence draws attention to the positive association between strong relationships and mental and physical health, wealth, happiness, and healthy child-development.⁹ The protective effect of strong personal relationships on the risk of dying, for example, is equal to the impact of giving up smoking, and exceeds many of the risk factors associated with mortality, including obesity.¹⁰ Society benefits when relationships flourish and bears the cost when they do not.

Relational capability shifts the focus away from merely supporting relationships to fostering the capability to develop and sustain strong relationships. Loving and caring for another person can build up both the giver and the receiver of care: caring and loving can be mutually reinforcing and rewarding activities. Caring can also be demanding and draining; protecting and supporting the relationship between the carer and the person being cared for is essential. Promoting and ensuring relational capability is an exciting challenge for the church, for government, and for private, public and voluntary sector organisations.

⁶ Weiss (1974) op.cit.

⁷ Mansfield, P., and Reynolds, J., (2014) 'Building relational capability: conditions for flourishing relationships', Executive Summary, OnePlusOne

⁸ ibid, p3.

⁹ See, for example: Prior, P.M. & Hayes, B.C. (2003). The Relationship between Marital Status and Health: An Empirical Investigation of Differences in Bed Occupancy within Health and Social Care Facilities in Britain 1921-1991. *Journal of Family Issues*, 24 (1), 124-148; Robles, R., Slatcher, R., Tombello, J., & McGinn, M., (2013). Marital quality and health: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, Advance online publication. doi: 10.1037/a0031859; Aassve, A., Betti, G., Mazzuco, S. & Mencarini, L. (2006). Marital Disruption and Economic Well-Being: A Comparative Analysis. Colchester: Institute for Social and Economic Research; Oguz, S., Merad S., Snape, D. (2013) Measuring National Well-being – What matters most to Personal Well-being? Office for National Statistics; and Proulx, C., Helms, H., & Buehler, C., (2007). Marital quality and personal well-being: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69, pp. 576-593.

¹⁰ Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T.B., and Layton, J.B., (2010) Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review *PLOS Medicine*, open access

Building relationships well - relationship and marriage preparation

'Good marriage preparation [should be] made available to all in committed relationships, not just those wanting a church wedding.'¹¹

There is universal acceptance that entering a committed intimate couple relationship is a very serious step. However, the extent to which people are well-prepared for the reality of a long-term relationship differs greatly. We know that some partners move in together before planning any kind of ceremony or making a public commitment. Some couples tend to slide into a 'living-together' relationship with no preparation or thought about what this means for each of them and for future decisions.¹² Indeed, research evidence indicates that 'sliding versus deciding' is a feature of some relationships at very many different family transitions, such as parenthood and separation, indicating a lack of preparation or understanding of the potential consequences of each transition.¹³

While moving in together provides an opportunity to check out the relationship by living together first, relatively few couples consciously seek support and advice at this stage. Many people suggested that everyone should be offered information, advice and support at the time they move in with their partner. Not to take the step seriously could be extremely unwise. Building the relationship living apart while exploring the implications of

being together makes for a greater likelihood of a stronger long term relationship.¹⁴ Moreover, security about the continuance of the relationship is believed to be one of the most essential types of safety that characterize healthy relationships and marriages.¹⁵ Similarly, every couple should be offered information and encouragement to think about the step they are taking when they are planning marriage or a civil partnership, irrespective of whether they choose a faith-based or a civil wedding ceremony. There are many ways in which this might be offered via courses, one-to-one and online.

Couples intending to marry in a Catholic church are required to attend marriage preparation. *Marriage Care* has been committed to sharing relationship skills and knowledge for the past 75 years, and offers marriage preparation courses to all couples preparing for a Catholic wedding, but which are open to anyone. In 2020/21, in less than 50 per cent of the couples seeking marriage preparation did both partners identify as Catholic; 87 per cent were cohabiting at the time, and 21 per cent had dependent children.¹⁶ Couples are offered a choice of group courses (*'Preparing Together'*) and individual couple courses (*FOCCUS*), with an emphasis on exploring expectations and helping couples to develop skills for living together. These courses are described as being:

'Thought-provoking and fun marriage preparation courses [that] will equip you with insights and know-how, clarity and confidence to avoid the pitfalls and build the best possible future together.'¹⁷

¹¹ Respondent to the Call for Evidence, Walker and Knights (2022) Briefing Paper Fourteen. op.cit.

¹² Stanley, S, M., Rhoades, G, K., and Markman, H, J., (2006) *Sliding versus Deciding: Inertia and the pre-marital cohabitation effect*; t <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2006.00418.x>

¹³ Ibid; Ahrons, C., (2004) *We're Still Family*, HarperCollins; Walker et al, (2004) *Picking up the pieces; Marriage and Divorce Two years after information provision* op.cit

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ Stanley, S, M., Markman, H, J., and Whitton, S, W., (2002) *Communication, conflict, and commitment: Insights on the foundations of relationship success from a national survey*. *Family Process*, 41, 659– 675.

¹⁶ Molden, M., (2022) Material prepared for the Commission. Supporting Papers I www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

¹⁷ ibid

We heard calls for a similar requirement for those intending to marry in the Church of England. Clear views were expressed that preparation should not be focused primarily on planning for the wedding ceremony itself, but should be open and honest about the meaning of marriage (and, indeed, a civil partnership) and a reality-check on the challenges inherent in a life-long committed relationship:

'Our faith tells us that commitment to these relationships is important, but also that there will be times of difficulty and conflict where help may be needed. It tells us that reconciliation wherever possible enables healing and flourishing. It also tells us that where the difficulties have proved to be irreconcilable, there is always forgiveness and redemption available. Help may be needed in developing self-awareness, in communication, in listening and understanding that the other person's story may be different to our own expectations and values, and finding strategies to work together through difference.'¹⁸

Sandra Millar, in her previous role as Head of the Church of England's Life Events team, told the Commission that, as a minimum, couples should be encouraged to reflect on their vows and how they intend to ensure a 'life-giving and lifelong' marriage. The Church of England's guidance on preparing couples for marriage states that it is the duty of the minister to explain the Church's doctrine of marriage, but this guidance can be variously interpreted. In our Call for Evidence, people noted organisations¹⁹ that are offering high quality courses, and churches select those that seem most appropriate to their community. The Church of England has a particular opportunity to focus attention on the couple and

their relationship in a way that is refreshing and may mitigate the stresses of preparing for the wedding.

Studies²⁰ have found that only a minority of married couples participate in comprehensive marriage preparation. Those who have done so are mostly positive about the experience: it had encouraged them to talk and think about issues they had not considered, their hopes and dreams for their future life together, and how they would cope with disagreements and everyday worries. The experience gives partners an opportunity to express their fears about entering a life-long committed relationship, their anxiety about things going wrong or fear of being unloved, especially if a previous relationship has ended unhappily.

We found consensus that the opportunity to attend marriage/relationship preparation should be available regardless of where the partners live, and offered to everyone forming a committed couple relationship, whether or not they are planning a religious ceremony. We believe that very few people planning a civil ceremony will have heard of marriage preparation and that even fewer would actively look for a marriage preparation course. This situation should be rectified if couples approaching marriage are to be supported from the start to think about the commitment they are making and how they will manage the challenges that all intimate couple relationships face at some time or other.

A number of priests in the Church of England indicated that while they believe that the church should be helping couples with marriage preparation, the delivery of marriage preparation should not be a responsibility that always falls on them. Nevertheless, the majority could see how important the offer is:

The Birmingham Matchmakers Forum

Commission members were keen to learn about initiatives for supporting marriage preparation for members of other faiths. Members of the Commission met with the founders of the *Birmingham Matchmakers Forum*, working to support relationships and offer marriage preparation in the Muslim community. Rehana and Mohamed Ismail²¹ were concerned about the number of divorces within the Muslim community and believed that during wedding preparations there was not enough focus on how the couple would live their lives afterwards.

The *Birmingham Match Makers Forum* was designed to support young Muslim men and women to meet potential spouses by providing a safe and acceptable environment for young people, their parents/guardians and mosque authorities and scholars in which the young people are supported in their choice of partner and subsequently on their journey to settle down to family life.

The Forum brings together Muslims of all traditions under 'an Islamic perspective'. The Forum assists young people to meet possible partners, and provides pre-marital preparation developed in consultation with Marriage Care and Care for the Family. During the coronavirus pandemic, courses were delivered online.

While the attitudes of young Muslims are changing, the Forum believes that preparation for married life is essential given the high number of divorces and, irrespective of whether couples opt for the matchmaking option, is introducing pre-marriage courses for engaged couples. Importantly, the Forum maintains contact with each couple who marry for at least two years after their wedding. The positive experience of the matchmaking event and marriage preparation is described by a young couple who married over two years ago on the Commission's website.²²

'We are called in so often - and mostly too late to pick up pastoral pieces of relationship breakdown. It [marriage preparation] also forms a great base for future 'check-ins' to facilitate a space where good relationships can continue to grow and grow stronger.'

Some made suggestions as to how the church can be better equipped to signpost couples to good resources:

'Contact all churches across the UK (and beyond) once a year with a 'newsletter' on marriage and relationships, including a directory or resources and courses ... encourage all churches to offer something to support marriage and relationships, either as an individual church or in collaboration with other churches in their community.'

¹⁸ Contributor to the Call for Evidence, Briefing Paper 14, op.cit.

¹⁹ See, for example, the work of Care for the Family www.careforthefamily.org.uk/courses/courses-for-couples/marriage-preparation

²⁰ Walker, Barrett et al (2010) et al op.cit.

²¹ Ismail, R., (2022) Marriage Preparation in the Muslim Community. Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

²² ibid

Our evidence suggests that the offer of comprehensive marriage preparation in the Church of England is rather sketchy around the country. Awareness of and access to materials and courses would appear to have a significant impact on how marriage ministry is discharged locally. Some churches refer couples to the Holy Trinity Brompton ‘Marriage Course’ as a useful resource but others, we were told, tend to be *‘winging it, or making their own resources.’* Some members of the clergy believe that the preparation currently available is not inclusive enough or sufficiently culturally sensitive.

Leading the way

There appears to be ‘a gap in the market’ and growing support for the Church of England to lead the way in developing marriage and relationship preparation that could be offered to every couple, including those choosing a civil ceremony and those forming a planned long-term cohabiting relationship.

As family roles and responsibilities have changed, so too have the expectations of marriage. Hindsight suggests that being prepared for the inevitable challenges in committed couple relationships and knowing how to handle them is extremely helpful in promoting reconciliation.

The Chief Executive of *Marriage Care* has suggested that:

‘At the root of all our various family types is an intimate adult partnership, the couple relationship – married or not, together or apart, known or unknown, healthy or unhealthy, fleeting or permanent. That can be an uncomfortable fact and a deeply painful reality for some and, as a result, our pastoral sensitivities or political sensibilities

tend to obscure the couple relationship from view. In doing so we rob our children and young people, families and households, of one of the most profound agents of the Common Good, foundational to a society in which everyone can flourish.’²³

He argues that if we are seeking to build a society in which everyone can flourish and has the common good at its heart, then it is essential to

‘give priority to the integrity, stability, and health of committed, intimate couple relationships as the basic cell of human society.’

This places couple relationships at the centre of teaching, preaching and pastoral care. He reminds us that:

‘Relationships are messy and they’re complicated and the hard work of tending to enduring love is not glamorous.’²⁴

Marriage/relationship preparation provides the ideal opportunity to build relational capability for a committed partnership. Many marriages these days involve couples who are creating a ‘blended’ family, often bringing together children from each partner’s previous relationship(s). This can bring a variety of challenges for the couple and for their children as they adapt to living with a step-parent while maintaining contact with a biological parent. Marriage preparation in these circumstances needs to take account of these circumstances in a sensitive and loving way. We note that the Holy Trinity Brompton’s Marriage Course has a special stream for people who are getting married with children from previous relationships.

Maintaining relationships well – Learning a new dance

‘A vital component of a healthy relationship is recognising that, as we travel life’s path and as our circumstances and situations inevitably change we need to learn a new dance’. Individuals evolve over time and so do our relationships ... Rather than approaching each challenge as a crisis, we should think instead of these moments as opportunities to acquire a new toolset. Whilst we rarely have any control over which challenge is going to hit and when it might do so, where we are effectively prepared and armed to recognise the tell-tale signs and to know where and how to find support, we can go some way toward averting a crisis. Successful relationships create and enable an environment in which people feel safe to share their concerns, support each other and work together toward a collective solution that benefits all.’²⁵

Just as preparing for a life together is important, so too is maintaining the commitment over time, hence the importance of learning key communication skills. The Commission heard

about a number of Relationship Enrichment courses which offer a couple the chance to focus on their relationship. Programmes can help couples to develop coping strategies to maintain a healthy relationship, such as talking and spending time together, demonstrating affection and thinking positively about the relationship.²⁶

Families can grapple with a range of issues which impact on everyday life such as ill-health, drug and alcohol addictions, gambling, domestic abuse, infidelity and bereavement. All of these can seriously undermine the stability of couple relationships and test commitment to the limit. Relationship support offers couples the chance to deal with these stressors and repair relationships that are struggling. The Commission was told that although there are many excellent relationship support programmes available, couples do not necessarily know about them or where to seek support. The Church of England is encouraged by ‘FamilyLife UK’ to highlight quality resources for couples in their community, encourage learning about relationship skills in schools, and to take advantage of their offer of learning and relationship building skills for members of the clergy.

²³ Molden, M., (2022) *If we’re serious about unlocking the Common Good we need to stop hiding the key!* Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Dembovsky, M., (2022) *A Vision for Relationship Support* JCounselling. Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

²⁶ See, for example, *Lets Stick Together* (Care for the Family); *Toucan Together* (app); *The Marriage Course* (HTB); *The Five Love Languages*; *The 4 Habits*

FamilyLife UK (part of Agape UK)

'Family Life' helps to transform relationships through providing hope and practical tools. Events and resources are based on research, experience of what works, and the Bible is used as a key reference point. The events and resources are suitable for those who are married, preparing for marriage, remarried or in a long-term relationship. Some couples are struggling and some are solid in their relationship. Everything is designed to be practical, fun, inspiring and give hope to those of all faiths and none.

Programmes include:

- 'Toucan Together' – an app for couples to strengthen and grow their relationship. Toucan offers a series of interactive online 'modules' covering topics such as: communication, conflict, love and sex, money and growing through challenges. This resource is positioned for any couple of all faiths and none. A weekly blog offers additional content from a wide range of experts.
- 'A Day Together' - a one day seminar for couples to invest in their relationship. Facilitating couples present practical relationship tools based on Biblical principles, brought alive with personal stories and illustrations. There are personal application exercises with plenty of time to talk privately as a couple. Topics covered include: communication, resolving conflict, love and sex and growing through challenges. The day is suitable for any couple of all faiths and none and presents Biblical principles for marriage but does not assume couples are married.
- 'Together' - investing in your marriage. A Bible-based resource on marriage for small groups of couples. A unique nine session resource now offered in eleven languages, combining practical relationship tools with Bible study. 'Together' is suitable for couples who are married or preparing for marriage who want to go deeper into God's plan for marriage and common real life marriage issues. It is openly Biblical and suitable for couples in a small group setting, discipleship and mentoring. 'Together' is a stand-alone resource and is also recommended as a follow-on from 'A Day Together'.

FamilyLife UK is keen to promote high-quality relationship education as mainstream and widespread so that people know what healthy, flourishing and authentic relationships look like; how to handle problems and conflict positively, and promote more investment in relationship education, which is preventative, over and above investment in support for relationships in crisis.

Understanding relationship stressors

Research demonstrates that the transition to parenthood has emerged as the most frequently cited stressor on couple relationships.²⁷ Forty-four per cent of mothers in a survey in England reported that there were more arguments with the baby's father after the arrival of a baby than previously.²⁸ The obligations of parenthood are the same whatever the family form and these can seem overwhelming if the parental relationship is under strain. Since the evidence indicates that the quality of the couple relationship has profound implications for the wellbeing of both parents and children as well as for a child's emotional, cognitive and physical development,²⁹ it is essential to consider how the couple relationship can be supported and strengthened during potentially disruptive transitions.³⁰

Other transitions which can cause strains in relationships include: moving home; unemployment or a change of job; ill-health, fertility issues and disability; children leaving home – the empty-nest; financial worries and retirement. Admitting that a relationship is under strain is difficult and many people prefer not to acknowledge the difficulties they are facing. Stigma is still a major barrier to seeking help and support.

The Commission took evidence from a range of relationship counselling agencies³¹ representing different faiths and none, all of whom gave a

similar message about the need for independent professional advice and guidance. This was first made available in the late 1930s when marriage guidance councils were progressively established³² with some government support. The 1947 Denning Report recommended that public funds should be provided for 'a marriage welfare service'.

Successive governments have taken this commitment seriously, but in recent years the responsibility for funding relationship support has been shuffled between several government departments, with a continued narrowing of the scope for funding shifting to addressing poor parenting and anti-social behaviour and more recently to supporting parents in conflict. While these programmes are laudable, the original aim – to support all kinds of couple relationships under stress as soon as difficulties arise – has been lost. Our evidence indicates that this move away from the original intent has far-reaching negative consequences for couples, children and society in general.

A comprehensive international evidence review of inter-parental conflict and youth psychopathology³³ reinforced the finding that the quality of the inter-parental relationship is an important influence on child and adolescent psychology. The message is stark:

'Children living in households marked by high levels of inter-parental conflict are at risk for serious mental health problems and future psychiatric disorder... Intervention programmes that target inter-parental

²⁷ Walker, J., (2014) *The Transition to Parenthood*. In Abela and Walker (eds) op.cit.

²⁸ Centre for Social Justice (2012) *Forgotten Families? The Vanishing Agenda*. CSJ

²⁹ Balfour, A., Morgan, M., and Vincent, C., (2012) *How Couple Relationships Shape our World: Clinical practice, research and policy perspectives*, Karnac

³⁰ Cowan, C. P., and Cowan, P.A., (2012) *Prevention: Intervening with parents at challenging transition points*, in A Balfour et al (2012) op.cit.

³¹ The Relationship Alliance, OnePlusOne, Relate, Marriage Care, Tavistock Relationships, JCounselling, The Asian Family Counselling Service

³² Including the Catholic Marriage Advisory Council, the Jewish Marriage Education Committee and the National Marriage Guidance Council, now Relate.

³³ Harold, G., and Sellers, R., (2018) Annual Research Review: Interparental conflict and youth psychopathology: as evidence review and practice focused update, *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com

conflict at the level of the inter-parental relationship may pay significant long-term dividends in reducing multiple costs associated with poor child mental health and extended outcomes.'³⁴

UK government data have shown that the parents of 11 per cent of children in two-parent families were experiencing relationship distress.³⁵

All this evidence underpins the need for the availability of effective relationship support services for couples whose relationship is distressed in every kind of household and across all cultures in our society.

Promoting a vision of hope

'Hope is the thing with feathers that perches on the soul and sings the tune without the words, and never stops at all.'³⁶

Relationship problems are associated with poorer physical and mental health, and distressed relationships can lead to alcohol abuse, domestic abuse and mood disorders. The evidence is unequivocal: appropriate, targeted support for couple relationships and building relational capability should be available to everyone if parents and children are to be able to flourish.

The message from the Jewish Counselling (JCounselling) service, adds to our story of hope:

'It is possible to help people who are experiencing relationship difficulties and distress. And of course the church has a key role to play in this, as a trusted institution in local communities. This is true generally, but perhaps particularly so in

relation to ethnic minority communities, for whom the concept of relationship support may be unfamiliar or suspect. The role the church might play in helping to normalise and de-stigmatise help-seeking in terms of relationship support should not be underestimated.'³⁷

The Asian Family Counselling Service (AFCS) highlighted the specific issues which can impact couple relationships in the Asian community from Hindu, Muslim and Sikh faiths. Many of the presenting issues are complex, reflecting the differing cultural expectations about how couple relationships should be conducted.³⁸

The evidence from the counselling agencies emphasises the value placed on relationship support by individuals and couples who seek help. However, it is still a minority of couples who seek professional support, usually after they have sought advice from family and close friends. While family members and friends can be extremely supportive, research evidence also points to the tendency for families to take sides, offering support to one rather than both partners.³⁹

The issues couples bring to counselling are similar across the agencies: poor communication; poor conflict resolution; loss of trust in the relationship and challenges at different transitions and life stages.

The vision for change across these agencies is widely shared. It is

'for a society in which everyone can form and sustain healthy marriages and couple relationships...everyone should have the same opportunity to enjoy a healthy, dependable, relationship, making a real

The Four Habits of All Successful Relationships

The 4 Habits of All Successful Relationships were developed by a married couple, Dr. Andrea and Jonathan Taylor-Cummings. The big idea is that all relationships face a similar set of hurdles, but by being equipped to get over the hurdles not only do we significantly improve the chances of a relationship surviving, but also we enable it to begin to thrive.

Falling in love is often the easy part of a relationship: after the honeymoon period relationships can begin to plateau or head downhill. During seasons of life involving change, such as setting up home together, becoming parents, or having a job that requires more time away from home, partners need to lean more heavily on each other in different ways. That can result in them bumping up against challenges including unmet expectations, unhelpful approaches to working through conflict, and trust, respect and communication issues. Being well-equipped to get through these periods is crucial, in order to "turn up" better, have better conversations and achieve better results.

Based on almost three decades of work in this area, the Taylor-Cummings have observed four simple yet fundamental habits that all good relationships exhibit:

1. BE CURIOUS, not critical
2. BE CAREFUL, not crushing
3. ASK, don't assume
4. CONNECT before you correct.

While these are simple habits, they are not automatic, and are for the most part contrary to our natural instincts and responses. The 4 Habits are not about being perfect but about being intentional in learning to change behaviours from habits that damage relationships to habits that strengthen them, while merging two lives into one.

difference to children's life chances, to adult wellbeing and to the emotional and economic health of our society.'⁴⁰

Members of the Church of England clergy also reminded us that they too may need relationship support and are not immune from the ups and downs that all couples experience. If clergy

and laity are so key to supporting others, they too must be supported. The work of the Four Habits aims to do just that, through a relationship support programme for personal and professional settings.

³⁴ ibid.

³⁵ Department for Work and Pensions (2017) *Improving Lives: Helping workless families – indicators and evidence base*.DWP

³⁶ Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

³⁷ Dembovsky op.cit.

³⁸ Focus on Practice. Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

³⁹ Walker et al (2010) op.cit.

⁴⁰ Molden, (2022) op.cit.

A key role for faith communities?

The Church of England, other churches and faith communities are well-placed to understand the tensions and difficulties couples are facing locally and, in collaboration with professional agencies, to equip lay and clergy members with the confidence, skills and resources to spot problems, and support couples and families when support is needed. This can include encouraging people to talk about relationship difficulties, raising awareness about the messiness of family life, destigmatising help and help-seeking, and signposting to local organisations for specialised support. Churches

can actively promote a support network and offer pathways of support for couples, away from their local parish when this is preferred to ensure confidentiality and privacy.

Moreover, many people we spoke to suggested that churches and faith buildings should be places of sanctuary where people can ask for help without being judged and without fear of stigma:

‘Treat all families with fairness and equality, tailored to their individual needs and requirements. Communicate and listen to the families with respect, dignity, kindness, humility and compassion.’⁴¹

⁴¹ Respondent to the Commission’s Call for Evidence

Key Messages from the Commission

1. Relationships matter at all stages of life, from birth to death. Loving, caring relationships are essential to our wellbeing and for human flourishing.
2. Everyone faces times of challenge and doubt. Offering support to all individuals, couples and families should be a matter of course and faith communities have a vital role to play. No-one is immune from the challenges and changes that occur throughout the life-course or from the pressures that today’s society brings.
3. Building relationships well and promoting relational capability are essential to family flourishing and stability.
4. Relationship support is essential, particularly at transition points, to hold couples and families together in love. Transitions in family life, such as baptisms, confirmation, funerals and other church-based celebrations/services, provide the Church of England with an opportunity to check in with couples and offer relationship enhancement, providing clergy and lay leaders are equipped with the appropriate knowledge and skills.
5. A fundamental shift in thinking is required to recognise the enormous impact of the quality of couple relationships on the wellbeing of adults and children.
6. The Church of England and faith communities have a vital role to play in supporting relationships to flourish and encouraging relational capability.
7. A vision for change which enables every person to be valued equally and supported to flourish, offers opportunities for hope.



Recommendations

The Commission urges the Church of England:

Through its clergy, parishes, and deaneries

To:

- Offer high quality preparation for marriage and other forms of committed adult relationships to every couple planning a religious or civil ceremony.

This will have resource implications and consideration should be given to including this work among the areas of mission which are eligible for central project funding.

- Commit to a culture of invitation for couples and place renewed emphasis on ongoing relationship support after a wedding ceremony, baptism and other church-based celebrations and services.

This could be achieved by curating and continuing to refresh the resources of the former Life Events Team, and made available through the staff of the Archbishops' Council.

- Pool resources at deanery level to focus on different aspects and the delivery of pastoral work, including marriage preparation and relationship support.

This could be achieved by debating the topic of marriage preparation at deanery synods and propose mechanisms for practical implementation which work well in local contexts.

- Work collaboratively with relationship support agencies to support families at all life stages continually to build relational capability.

The Commission urges the Government to:

- Ensure that registrars are required to signpost couples to marriage/relationship preparation available in their community when the couple give notice of an intention to marry or form a civil partnership.
- Invest in relationship capability and relationship support for all couples to build and maintain strong, stable families and, when necessary, enable them to separate well. This should be done in partnership with specialist charities, community groups, statutory agencies and faith communities.
- Ensure that relationship support is routinely offered at life transitions, especially at the transition to parenthood and when assuming caring responsibilities.

5. WHEN LOVE IS NOT ENOUGH

*'If you are human you love and you doubt'*¹

When we build loving, caring relationships it is particularly painful when they go wrong. It would be folly to believe that intimate partners, whether married or not, simply walk away from a committed relationship without a backward glance. Many couples find a way to manage and cope with pressures and conflicts, while others flounder and eventually face the point of no return. This does not necessarily mean that love has died, and for one or both partners love may continue for a long time beyond separation. The journey towards eventual separation and divorce and building a new life is usually long, difficult and stressful.

A historical lens on divorce tells the story of what Stone referred to as 'a 'gigantic, moral, religious, and legal revolution'², the most profound and far-reaching social change to have occurred in family life in England in the

last 500 years. A largely non-separating society in England in the Middle Ages through to the mid-nineteenth century, in which marriage was primarily ended by death, had become a society by the late twentieth century in which marriages were largely terminated by choice. Over the last 50 years a third of all marriages have ended in divorce. Moreover, the number of relationships ending is likely to be higher than this since cohabitations are not registered and the number of couples who split up is unknown. We have seen a huge change in our society:

'Eight hundred years ago in the Christian West, the highly restrictive moral code of the medieval canon law made divorce virtually impossible except for the very rich and powerful who could lobby and bribe their way to annulments from Rome.'³

¹ Marc Chagall, 1977

² Stone, L., (1990), Road to Divorce: England 1530 – 1987 p422

³ ibid p1

We should remember, however, that although death was the only way out of marriage for the vast majority of people, this did not indicate that marriages were necessarily any happier or more committed. Strict internalised values and powerful external pressures contrived to keep partners together, sometimes in very unhappy marriages. Historians have noted that as romantic love became more prevalent during the eighteenth century and increasing numbers of people looked to find their own partners, this shift led to a rise in marital unhappiness. Nevertheless, changes in divorce legislation have been slow to emerge and it is only during the life of this Commission that the adversarial process in England and Wales has been reformed, and a new emphasis placed on reducing conflict between the partners and minimising the potentially detrimental consequences of parental separation for children and for their parents. While re-partnering and step-parenting were common in centuries past, the circumstances that led to these transitions were very different.

Managing conflict well

'It is within families themselves where peace can begin.'⁴

The 'happy-ever-after' image of marriage and intimate couple relationships that pervades popular culture, including in the church, does not reflect the need to work at maintaining loving relationships. High expectations and an enduring belief that these relationships will last forever frequently fail to materialise. We need to be realistic.

The Bible helps us to be realistic about the stresses and strains that exist in families.⁵ There are stresses and strains revealed in Adam and Eve's relationship at the very beginning of the Bible. Then throughout the Old Testament there are stories of marital and familial challenges and conflicts. As the Chief Rabbi noted to us, Genesis could be called 'The book of the dysfunctional family'. When we look forward to Jesus' own experience, the holy family shows us that facing difficult circumstances is normal. This family itself keeps changing shape as children develop, new children arrive, family members die, and when taking on new responsibilities.

The holy family also reveals that conflicts and disputes happen within families and that these are not always easily resolved. The household codes found in the letters of both Paul and Peter show that the handling of family life required significant attention for the first Christian communities. Reconciliation is a major theme of these letters, and it applied into family life alongside other major issues faced by the early church. In all the Scriptures, holding marriage as being of high value is clear, as is the upholding of the responsibility to care both for children and the elderly.

Sadly, marriage does not ensure permanence. It is encouraging, however, that divorce rates have been falling since 2000, and in 2020 were at their lowest in England and Wales since the 1970s.⁶ One reason for the decline has been cited as the later age of marriage, meaning that couples are likely to be more mature when they marry, more likely to make better choices about who to marry, and are better able to handle conflict within the marriage.⁷ There are fewer

divorces among younger couples: the average age of divorce is 46 for men and 44 for women.⁸ We know that a significant number of those divorcing, maybe as many as 20 per cent, will have been separated/divorced previously.

Data from the *Millennium Cohort Study* show that 44 per cent of children did not live with both their biological parents throughout their childhood to the age of 17.⁹ It is difficult to ascertain the number of families who are 'blended' to include step-parents, step-children and other new relationships.¹⁰ The 2011 census suggests that some 10 per cent of couple families with dependent children involved step-relationships,¹¹ and some 3 per cent of children were dividing their time between two homes, living some of their time with their mother and some with their father.¹²

Although adults who divorce are likely to re-partner, second relationships appear to be less stable than first ones, and one transition increases the likelihood of further changes in partnerships.¹³ So although the number of marriages ending in divorce is falling, there is still good reason to be concerned. The dissolution of a marriage and, indeed, any kind of intimate couple relationship, is distressing and potentially harmful for family members, especially children. There is little evidence, however, that couples take the decision lightly to separate and/or divorce: quite the contrary.

Most think long and hard about doing so, and some people subsequently regret the decision.¹⁴

Many studies over the last 25 years have consistently highlighted the potentially detrimental impacts of parental separation and divorce on parents and on their children.¹⁵ These include associations between divorce and poorer mental and physical health of the adults concerned; potential increase in child poverty; the loss of or disruption in a child's parental relationships; and poor outcomes for children relating to educational attainment, and behavioural problems.¹⁶ Parental separation can substantially disrupt and seriously compromise children's stability and consistency in their care. The risks are greatest when there is enduring parental conflict, disruption or loss of a relationship with one parent, usually the father, and child poverty.

These negative impacts of separation and divorce are not universal nor inevitable. The majority of children and young people experience short-term instability before adjusting to changes in their family circumstances, although multiple transitions add to the stress. The younger children are when they experience parental separation, the greater the likelihood that they will experience multiple transitions in family structures. Nevertheless, it is a minority of children who suffer long-term detrimental effects which continue into

⁸ <https://www.nimblefins.co.uk/divorce-statistics-uk#rate>

⁹ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2022) *Families and Inequalities*. Deaton Review. <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/>

¹⁰ Children's Commissioner op.cit.

¹¹ ONS (2011) 2011 Census Analysis: *How do living arrangements, family type and family size vary in England and Wales?*

¹² ONS (2011) *Dependent Children Usually Resident in England and Wales with a Parental Second Address Census 2011*.

¹³ Pryor, op.cit.

¹⁴ Walker, et al (2004) J., McCarthy, P., Stark, C., and Laing, K., (2004) op.cit.; Musick, K., and Bumpass, L., (2012) *Re-examining the case for marriage; union formation and changes in wellbeing*. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 74 (1): 1-18.

¹⁵ See, for example: Coleman, L., and Glenn, F., (2009) *When Couples Part: understanding the consequences for adults and children*. OnePlusOne; Mooney, A., Oliver, G., and Smith, M., (2009) *Impact of Family Breakdown on Children's Wellbeing: Evidence Review*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, RR113; Walker, J., Barratt, H., Wilson, G., and Chang, Y-S., (2010) *Relationships Matter: Understanding the Needs of Adults (Particularly Parents) Regarding Relationship Support*. Department for Children, Schools and Families RR233

¹⁶ Amato, P. R., and Cheadle, J., (2005) *The long reach of divorce: divorce and child-wellbeing across three generations*. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol67.pp191-206

⁴ Susan Partnow: *Families for Peace* 1986

⁵ See Butler, op.cit; Strawbridge, op.cit; Hamley, I., (2022), *Families and Households in the Old Testament*; Knights, C., (2022) *The New Testament Household Codes* Theology Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁶ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/divorce/datasets/divorcesinenglandandwales>

⁷ <https://www.crispandco.com/site/divorce-statistics/>

adulthood,¹⁷ and the association between stressful life events, such as parental separation, and negative developmental outcomes for children is neither simple nor direct.¹⁸

Many protective factors can intervene to reduce the impacts, including parents maintaining positive relationships with each other as well as with their children and focusing their attention on their children's best interests and wellbeing. Research has shown that children living in strong, stable families tend to enjoy the best health and the best outcomes.

The triggers for ending a relationship are various,¹⁹ but most people cite a cluster of problems which may include money worries, ill-health and infidelity. The majority of relationships that break down deteriorate over time, with distress, strain, poor communication and unhappiness slowly destroying a loving partnership. For some, there is a final straw, the one 'that broke the camel's back'. But most people can recognise when and how the slow drift towards the breakdown of their relationship began, acknowledging that they were inclined to put the difficulties on the back burner, and failing to take any steps to try to halt the decline. With hindsight, many wished they had taken action and done more to protect the relationship before it was too late.²⁰

Not all relationships should or could be rescued. There is no doubt that some relationships are unhealthy and dangerous. Separation and divorce enables those living with domestic

abuse, alcoholism and drug addiction, for example, to seek safer lives elsewhere. Where there is domestic abuse and/or a high level of conflict in the home, especially if it is long-lasting, children, young people and adults are in toxic situations where they are having to survive day by day.

The legacy of conflict

'Couples can get so entrenched in combat positions that even well after they physically separate, often years after, they have not truly split. Their fighting acts as the glue.'²¹

In 2021 there were 2.3 million separated families in Britain, involving 3.6 million children.²² The levels of conflict children witness before, during and after separation influence the longer-term impacts which can continue well into adulthood. These can include anxiety and depression, substance abuse, conduct problems, academic difficulties, and possible criminality. Parents who engage in frequent, intense, and poorly resolved inter-parental conflict put children's mental health and long-term life chances at risk, with negative effects evidenced across infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.²³ Children's exposure to frequent, intense and poorly resolved conflict in the family, and especially between parents who are struggling to live in harmony with each other, is bad for children.²⁴

¹⁷ *ibid*; Strohschein, L (2005), *Parental divorce and child mental health trajectories*, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol 67 p 286-300 9

¹⁸ Amato, P. R., and Boyd, L. M., (2014) *Children and Divorce in World Perspective in Abela and Walker* (eds) op.cit.

¹⁹ Walker et.al.(2010) op.cit.

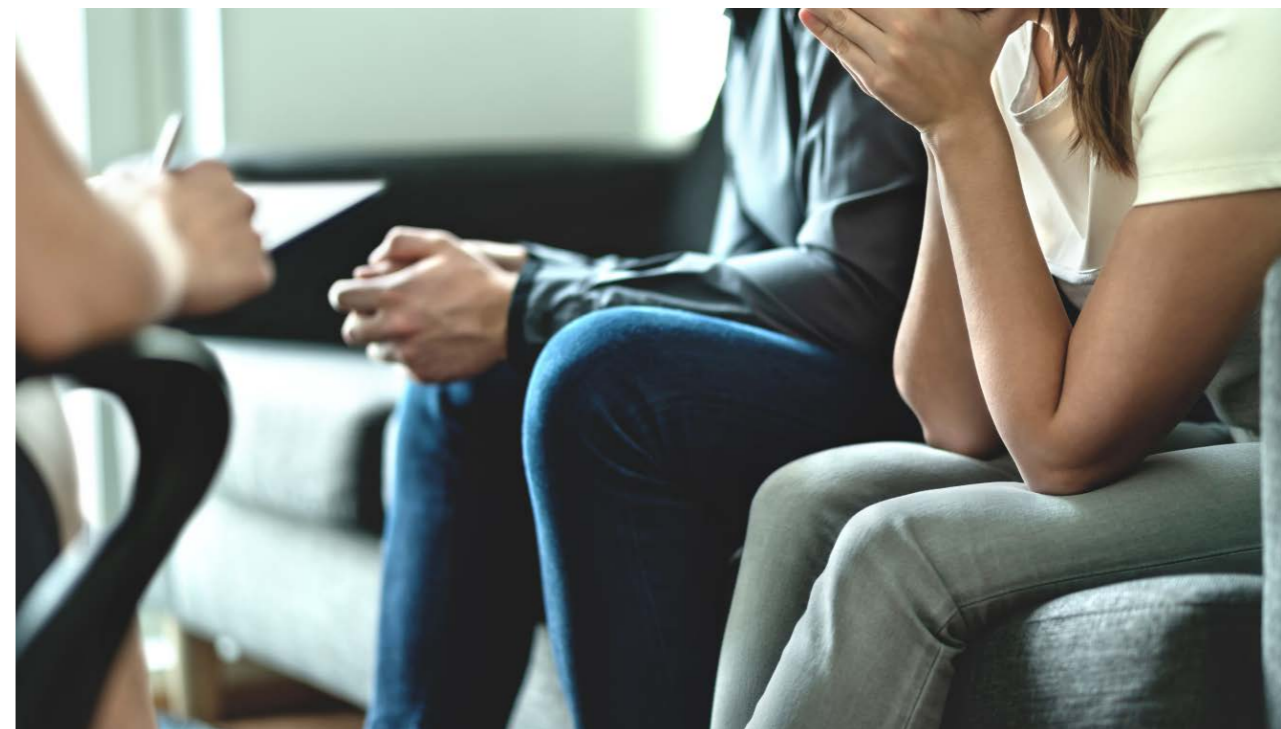
²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ Isaacs, M.B., Montalvo, B., and Abelsohn, D., ((1986) *The Difficult Divorce; therapy for children and families*, Basic Books p73

²² Office for National Statistics (2022). Separated families statistics: April 2014 to March 2021 (experimental). <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/separatedfamilies-statistics-april-2014-to-march-2021-experimental/separated-families-statisticsapril-2014-to-march-2021-experimental>

²³ Harold, G., Acquah, D., Sellers, R., & Chowdry, H. (2016) *What works to enhance inter-parental relationships and improve outcomes for children*. DWP ad hoc research report no. 32. DWP

²⁴ Harold and Sellers (2018) op.cit.



'It ended up being like a general malaise. You'd come home – everyone's knackered, there's not enough money in the pot, you know the kids are going bloody crazy. It ended up being the default position to have an argument about something...a lot of shouting, kids shouting, us shouting...'²⁵

In these circumstances, children often try to protect a parent from harm, or look for ways to deflect the conflict, learning strategies to de-escalate an unhappy and angry situation. Children take on complex roles to manage a deeply unhappy environment. This almost certainly impacts negatively on their school work, their friendships, their mental health and their wellbeing. A meta-analysis of 54 studies relating to divorce and its long-term mental health effects reported that adults affected by parental divorce when they were a child had a higher risk of developing mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression.²⁶

Some people stay in deeply destructive and sometimes abusive relationships 'for the sake of the children', little realising that this kind of conflict-ridden environment is extremely detrimental. Some parents turn to alcohol to drown their sorrows, others spend increasing amounts of time out of the family home, and others become increasingly depressed and unable to cope with parental responsibilities. Not all partners separate with high levels of conflict, but many do. While some couples arrive at a mutual and amicable decision to separate and are determined to do their utmost to avoid conflict, it can be difficult to avoid the blame game as the often harsh reality of a life apart and parenting apart dawns.²⁷

Reducing conflict between separated parents and ensuring that their children can enjoy a continuing, loving relationship with each parent where it is safe to do so are essential ingredients in supporting children's wellbeing

²⁵ Walker et al (2010) op.cit. p59

²⁶ Auersperg, F., Vlasak, T., Ponocny, I. and Barth, A. (2019). *Long-term effects of parental divorce on mental health – a meta-analysis*. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 119, pp. 107–115. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2019.09.011>

²⁷ Harold and Sellers op.cit.

and facilitating positive child development. This has become an important policy goal for successive governments in the UK. If a parental relationship cannot be repaired and if separation and/or divorce are inevitable, assisting parents to reduce conflict between them and maintain a positive co-parenting relationship is an extremely important predictor of how well children and, indeed, their parents, can adjust.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has argued that love should not be blind. When relationships break down

‘peacebuilding requires patience in love. The nature of conflict is to generate suspicion.’²⁸

Suspicion can easily creep in to discussions between partners about future arrangements, especially when there are children involved and each parent is worried about possibly losing the close relationship between parent and child in the aftermath of divorce. Finding ways forward that enable everyone to flourish may take time, and at the heart of the process must be some kind of transformation and, almost certainly, some compromises. As Archbishop Justin pointed out:

‘Changing hearts takes a very long time...it is difficult and demanding for all involved.’²⁹

Unless there are adequate systems and support in place for families whose relationships may be at breaking point, then large numbers of adults and children will be hampered in their ability to flourish. As a Commission we took this issue very seriously and were impressed by a relatively new initiative, *The Parents Promise*,³⁰ which focuses parents on the needs of their children when they

have a baby in case their relationship ends at some stage in the future.

The road to Family Justice Reform

‘The fragmented nature of the family justice system is perhaps why, despite seemingly widespread consensus that changes are needed to improve outcomes for children and their families, transformation is slow and difficult to achieve.’³¹

For nearly 40 years attempts have been made to reform the family justice system and to transcend the artificial boundary between relationship counselling and conflict resolution, offer support to parents and their children at all stages of the separation journey, and fulfil an important educative function by providing advice and information about the impacts of marriage breakdown and divorce.

The need to remove the focus on fault has been recognised for many years. It has long been acknowledged that the legal process of divorce should attempt to minimise the bitterness and hostility between the partners/parents, reduce the trauma for children and keep to a minimum the financial cost to the family and the public purse without recourse to the court.³² Establishing trust and mutual respect between partners is unlikely to be accomplished unless and until both of them are able to leave the hurt, blame and recriminations behind and, if they have children, to put their needs first. Citing fault to evidence the irretrievable breakdown of a relationship has made it very difficult to leave recriminations behind.

The Parents Promise

The Parents Promise is an initiative which encourages parents to make a promise when they have children. *The Parents' Promise* was launched in 2021 as a step in creating a child-focused society to ensure the long-term wellbeing of children when parents separate. It is promoted by the Positive Parenting Alliance, a group of parenting organisations, including the Relationships Alliance, and individuals who believe that all children deserve the most positive experience possible during parental separation or divorce. The aim is for a truly child-focused society and better systems to ensure the long-term wellbeing of children whose parents split up.

The Parents Promise helps parents make a positive commitment to their children when they are born in case parents subsequently decide to separate and divorce while their children are still growing up. Parents sign a promise to put their children's needs first, ensure that both parents will work together as partners to provide for the children, including not saying bad things about the other parent, keep them safe, and create the best conditions for them to thrive. The promise can then be revisited if parents subsequently split up.

It is well known that separation and divorce have negative impacts on parents' ability to work well when they are stressed, and this initiative enables employers to support parents and help them to keep their promise at a particularly stressful time. Therefore, businesses are being asked to change workplace culture to support families when parents separate. Businesses who sign up to the scheme are provided with guidance and support, including templates for policies on parental separation.

A number of major businesses, such as supermarkets and charities, including relationship support agencies, are already partnering with the initiative, and churches are well-placed to support families by partnering with and promoting the promise. The Church of England could encourage the signing of this promise when a child is baptised, for example.

²⁸ Welby, J., (2022) *The Power of Reconciliation*, Bloomsbury Continuum p112

²⁹ *ibid* p157

³⁰ <https://theparentspromise.org.uk/>

³¹ Harker, L., (2020) *A fragmented family justice system – is more research the answer?* Family Law vol 50 p372

³² Marjoribanks, D., and Walker, J., (2019) *Family Relationships and Family Justice in Europe: Changes and Challenges* Family Court Review vol57, no3, p313-326

Learning the lessons about how to support families

We believe that there is a very strong case for ensuring that support for couples and parents is available at various times during the life course and especially before, during and after separation and divorce.³³ This is a conclusion that contributors to our Commission have strongly reinforced. Various research studies have highlighted key lessons which help us to think about new opportunities to support separating and divorcing families by providing the right help at the right time:³⁴

- most people who face the termination of their marriage experience extreme distress and parents are rarely prepared for the fundamental emotional, psychological, economic, and practical changes which have to be accomplished during and beyond the divorce process
- the vast majority of parents care deeply about the impact of family breakdown on their children and want to do their very best for them, but many find it difficult to focus on their children's needs when they are consumed by their own emotions
- navigating the family justice system is challenging for parents, especially those with no access to resources such as legal advice
- emotional and relational resources are key to parents' ability to negotiate together for the future arrangements in the best interests of their children

- counselling has been shown to help people to process and manage the varying emotions surrounding the ending of their relationship and focus on the future
- becoming a post-divorce parent is usually a difficult transition, made more so by any ongoing bitterness and unresolved conflict: parents (usually fathers) who are not able to spend time with their children may be in danger of falling out of their children's lives
- the courts are not the best place to sort out complex family relationships³⁵

In 2011, the Family Justice Review in England and Wales³⁶ highlighted that too many families whose relationships disintegrate end up in the court system. The review resulted in the creation of a single unitary family court and the statutory presumption that the involvement of both parents in their children's lives post-separation would further children's wellbeing and best interests.

A new Act, new opportunities

'The proposed reform is intended to remove the 'blame game' and reduce conflict when couples split up. This is very much welcomed. The Bill is silent on the provision of relationship support however, which needs to be available much earlier in the process of relationship breakdown as well as the later stages.'³⁷

After 30 years of campaigning for change, the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020

³³ Walker, J., Marjoribanks, D., and Misca, G., (2019) *Modern families, modern family justice: supporting family relationships in fast changing socio-political-economic climates* Family Court Review Vol 57 No3 p301-312

³⁴ Walker, J., (ed) (2001) *Information Meetings and Associated Provisions Within the Family Law Act 1998, Final Evaluation Report*, Lord Chancellor's Department. See Symonds, J., Dermott, E., Hitchings, E., and Staples, E., (2022) *Separating families: Experiences of separation and support*; Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

³⁵ Walker et al (2004) *Picking up the Pieces: Marriage and Divorce Two Years after Information Provision*. op.cit.

³⁶ Norgrove, D., and the Family Justice Review (2011,) *Family Justice Review: Final Report*, Ministry of Justice, Department of Education, and the Welsh Government.

³⁷ Walker, J., (2020) *Divorce reform and relationship support*. Submission to the MoJ DDS Bill team

came into force in April 2022, introducing a 'no-fault' divorce/civil partnership registration system and the end of an adversarial approach to separation and divorce.

This very welcome radical reform is designed to reduce the potential for enduring conflict between parents and encourage more conciliatory post-separation relationships. By not having to apportion blame, one partner on the other, the expectation is that this will reduce the conflicts which arise within an adversarial process, and offer a better chance for couples to separate more amicably and co-parent their children beyond separation.

The Commission has looked carefully at ways in which the new legislation provides a golden opportunity to reduce the negative impacts of divorce on children and their parents.

Protecting the ties that bind

While the partners no longer have to cite fault, they are required to wait for a minimum period of 20 weeks between the start of divorce proceedings and making an application for a conditional order. All the mediators, lawyers and family law specialists who have given evidence to the Commission have reaffirmed their belief that the period of reflection should be used effectively. In a few cases, it might flush out those ruptured relationships that could be repaired even at a very late stage. If reconciliation is not possible, the time should be used to help parents create a positive cooperative relationship which is particularly critical for children's outcomes. This period of time will only be used well if couples are able to reflect constructively.

Taking the heat out of separation and divorce is a critical first step in promoting continuity and loving relationships between parents and their children. Parents who can communicate and cooperate with each other are the most likely to encourage their children to have a meaningful, loving relationship with both their parents, and to support their children through the many transitions they will experience. The common factor that characterises families in which both parents stay in regular touch with their children is continuing good communication between the parents.³⁸

Parents need access to comprehensive information which includes practical and realistic strategies for managing the challenges inherent in children moving between two homes, and support in adjusting to new ways of engaging with the other parent.³⁹ There are a number of programmes which are available, but may not be known by parents.⁴⁰

Courts and the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass) officers have the power to refer parents to a *Separated Parents Information Programme* (SPIP)⁴¹ which helps them to understand how to put children's interests first. SPIPs have been highly valued by parents, many of whom believe that all parents should be encouraged to access a SPIP as early as possible when separation is becoming a reality. The Commission proposes that SPIPs should be freely available to all parents immediately at the beginning of the 20-week waiting period in order to focus their attention firmly on the needs of their child(ren) at a critical time in their lives, and to help parents move forward together, able to understand the importance of positive co-parenting after

³⁸ Walker et al (2004) op.cit.

³⁹ Trinder, L., Beek, M., and Connolly, J., (2002) *Making Contact: how parents and children negotiate and experience contact after divorce* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation)

⁴⁰ For example: Resolution, provides a *Parenting Through Separation* guide, and has launched a new model of working (Resolution Together) which allows family lawyers to work with and advise couples jointly, including the provision of legal advice. Resolution's evidence to the Commission

⁴¹ Cafcass.gov.uk

separation and divorce.

Resolution (which brings together some 6,500 lawyers, mediators, collaborative practitioners, arbitrators and family justice professionals) has proposed that couples should have access to early legal advice and anyone who meets the criteria for legal aid for family mediation should be able to have an initial meeting with a family lawyer. Much criticism has been voiced about the removal of legal aid for separating couples unless there are allegations of domestic abuse or where a child is at risk. We are aware that Family Mediation Vouchers have been available under a Ministry of Justice Mediation scheme to aid couples in difficulty who want to resolve arrangements for their children amicably, and welcome the continuation of these.

Contributors to the Commission have pointed to the support for separating families in other jurisdictions which bring key services together to avoid silo approaches to support. The National Association of Child Contact Centres (NACCC)⁴² has urged that, in order to protect children whose parents split up, financial investment here should mirror these initiatives and should be targeted towards:

‘Early intervention services, providing there are no safety issues, such as counselling, mediation, parenting programmes and child contact centres free of charge at the point of need.’

A recent small qualitative study⁴³ of fathers, mothers, and children has reinforced the evidence from previous research in England and Wales relating to separation and divorce and the evidence presented to our Commission. It highlights the importance of access to relevant resources:

‘Emotional and relational resources were also key to being able to negotiate with ex-partners. When parents found it hard to manage their distress, conflict and tension could become entrenched, making it more difficult to manage the separation.’⁴⁴

Parents had appreciated the emotional support they received from counselling, which they valued as a space to process their feelings about the separation. The researchers recommend that:

‘Policy developments should consider how a ‘safety net’ of support can be developed for separating families that includes authoritative information, legal advice and emotional support.’

Our overriding conclusion is that relationship support must be accessible, affordable and available when it is first needed and at any time when families are seeking to repair, manage or dissolve difficult relationships. It is apparent that early intervention to support relationships increases opportunities for relationship ruptures to be repaired and for partnerships to thrive and endure. Therefore it is essential that the opportunity to seek support is provided when relationships begin to deteriorate, and in the period after an application for divorce is made when the focus is likely to be on helping couples to reduce conflict and work out how they will continue to parent in a life apart. Resources to improve communication and relational skills can enable parents to cope better with stressful emotions and keep their children at the heart of their decision-making.⁴⁵ This will have a long term benefit for the children. Early intervention will enable them to handle the emotional stresses and thus make it far more likely that

⁴² National Association of Child Contact Centres. Submission to the Commission. Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁴³ Symonds, J., Dermott, E., Hitchings, E., and Staples, E., (2022) *Separating Families: Experiences of separation and support*. Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Odell, J (2022) *Why everyone deserves healthy relationships*, OnePlusOne Supporting Papers | The Church of England

there are no significant long term damaging impacts on their overall health and wellbeing.

The new legislation offers a timely opportunity to harness best practice to provide support as early as possible, especially at the beginning of the 20 week period of reflection. Best practice is characterised as restructuring familial relationships to promote outcomes that are future-oriented; take account of each person’s vulnerabilities (including safety concerns); and recognise children’s best interests at all times. This would include:

1. Implementing high-quality front-line services for separating families: shifting resources to the front-end of the family justice system to ensure co-ordination and support for a broad range of services which are highly visible, easy to access, user-friendly, co-ordinated and integrated.
2. Providing post-separation support: family issues may be ongoing long after the initial divorce/separation has taken place because shared parental responsibility requires the maintenance of long-term relationships.

Lost pasts and new futures: the search for kindness and peace

‘The church must surely introduce peace-making as a spiritual discipline, alongside all the others. Any good Christian should be exercising peace-making skills.’⁴⁶

In our Call for Evidence we asked two questions about the ways in which government and public policy and the Church of England and other faith groups could reduce conflict in families

and between intimate partners.⁴⁷ We found considerable agreement that government should do more to support families in conflict and especially when relationships are in danger of breaking up. The following response was typical of many:

‘[Government should provide] funding for support groups and counselling and free legal help.’⁴⁸

Many people highlighted concerns about the rising cost of living, housing costs and child care costs, all of which increase pressures on families, making it harder to afford counselling, legal advice and mediation.

Relate North Thames and Chilterns called for a cross-government relationships strategy at central government level which would also require all local authorities to show that family and social relationships are at the heart of local policies and practices. This call for a clear strategy for separated families was echoed in many submissions to the Commission:

‘The government needs a strategy for separated families. The government needs to support involvement of both parents in childcare ... prioritise their relationship with their children over self-interest.’

A number of people referred to the *Reducing Parental Conflict Programme* funded by the Department for Work and Pensions as a pioneering policy to offer support to parents who separate. Several suggested that counselling support should be funded by government so that it is easier and cheaper to access:

‘There needs to be coordinated oversight by the government of provision for families who separate ... local services to support families in difficulty navigate the choppy

⁴⁶ Walker, J., (2022) *Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Five Couple Relationships: recognising, reducing and resolving conflict*. Briefing Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

waters of separation and help them find a peaceable way forward that puts their child's welfare first. Nothing less ... will change society's thinking to a kinder, more peaceable understanding of 'family' when parents live apart.'

References to the need for kindness and a peaceable understanding of relationships that end in separation was a dominant theme running through many of the responses about the role of the church and faith communities in reducing conflict. A number of people focused on peace-making and teaching communication skills, not only for those divorcing but for all families who separate whether they are married, in a civil partnership, or cohabiting. This sentiment chimes closely with the Archbishop of Canterbury's work on reconciliation⁴⁹, the capacity to understand difference and be curious about and concerned for others. Love in action requires us to be present and to listen to those who are struggling to find peace.

A significant number of contributors to the Commission were critical of what they described as the Church of England's silence on family separation, *'having its head in the sand, buried and unresponsive,'*⁵⁰ leaving people feeling helpless while the church looks through the lens of justice and judgement. While some churches offer a more sensitive and compassionate response, nevertheless it is clear that a lens of judgement does not offer peace-making as it relies on a blame-shame narrative, seeing separation and divorce as sinful.

A peaceful separation involves each partner making the difficult choices which will put their children's interests before their own. This has

been described as a grace-led approach which is sacrificial and grounded in an act of love.⁵¹ Gittoes has pointed out that:

'In our households and families, sacrificial love may not always be reflected in the things that are noticeable or recorded ... It might be in taking time to communicate and resolve conflict, handling emotions, learning from what has happened rather than blaming another ... At other times, it is extending kindness and care ... somehow bearing the cost of love and the hope of transformation together ... Sacrificial love ... This is the stuff of households, the fabric of family life, the development of social networks and God's kingdom.'⁵²

Many people have urged the Church of England and faith communities to break the silence about family separation and lead a pastoral response with grace:

'Churches need to speak up too and break their silence on this issue If the church wants to be part of any answer to supporting families and/or households, then it must ... join in constructive approaches to manage separation better. It's time for the church to acknowledge the families who are differently shaped, where parents live apart, and are supported in peace-making with the other parent, and where children can be free to thrive during their childhoods.'⁵³

We recognise that this means addressing the reluctance of some Christian communities to address unpleasant and painful issues, particularly when many people in church congregations live with the silence because

of the stigma associated with their own experiences. Learning to say the unsayable in churches is essential if the Church of England is to support and walk alongside people whose relationships are in trouble and when they break down.

Some churches offer valuable resources, including the 'Restored Lives' course running

in some 40 churches in the UK, and a similar course for young people, 'Your Direction'. We visited Yeovil Community Church which offers a deep commitment to relationships including family separation and a range of impressive support.

Yeovil4Family

Yeovil4Family was initially a family support project set up by churches in response to the need for additional support for families in the local community. The aim was to turn the tide of family breakdown and see children being loved and cared for prosper, and family relationships that are constructive instead of being destructive and damaging. Yeovil4Family is hosted by Yeovil Community Church, who in 2012 were awarded the contract to work alongside South Somerset Together, a partnership between the local council and key agencies to improve the quality of life in South Somerset. Working alongside isolated families Yeovil4Family played a key role in supporting the government's Troubled Families Agenda.



Yeovil4Family trains volunteers from a range of backgrounds, many connected to local churches, who work alongside a team of paid staff. The skills that are most important are listening and aptitudes for relationships, and being able to work with both Christian and secular families and individuals. Matching volunteers with families is crucial to their way of relational working.

Since 2015, Yeovil4Family has been funded by grants and through service level agreements and has extended its work to include families without children and rough sleepers. Operating out of a former car showroom premises, Yeovil4Family now works across three areas: family support; refugee resettlement; homelessness and rehousing. With a vision to work by God's spirit and in partnership, Yeovil4Family has built relationships in the community, working with local authorities, health trusts, and charities. During the coronavirus pandemic, their premises were used as Yeovil's main vaccination centre, which was beneficial in introducing people to the work of the church.

At the time of our visit in September 2022, Yeovil4Family were exploring the possibility of becoming a Family Hub, convening a network of secular and Christian organisations, and in discussion with the local authority.

A large neon sign in the reception announces 'LOVE' to all who enter the building.

⁴⁹ Welby, (2022) op.cit.

⁵⁰ Adam, H (2022) *Family Separation and the church*. Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁵¹ ibid.

⁵² Gittoes op.cit.

⁵³ Contributor to the Call for Evidence

The President of the Family Division, Sir Andrew McFarlane, has suggested that there have to be better ways to support separating parents than through the courts, and the task of finding them is a matter for society in general.⁵⁴ He has called for wider societal engagement, laying down a challenge for the faith community to engage with policy-making, offer a helping and kindly hand, and lead with love and grace. Yeovil4Family offers an excellent example of this approach.

Learning to disagree well

'People need to learn how to communicate in ways that are non-aggressive, to disagree well and to work through conflict when it arises. Churches can be communities where this is modelled.'⁵⁵

One of the most important challenges for individuals and families today is learning how to disagree well. The Archbishop of Canterbury⁵⁶ notes that disagreeing well is often complicated. Forgiveness is even harder. Being able to disagree well is an essential aspect of loving relationships and being loved, and requires many small peace-making steps on a daily basis when relationships have floundered. Reconciliation and forgiveness take courage and time. The church can offer the time to families who struggle to make peace and want to move into a new life characterised by a lack of conflict.

Many people have referred to the importance of the Church of England raising awareness of the stresses that can lead to separation and the impact of conflict. That means being prepared to talk about conflict in relationships. Being

able to disagree well is a skill that the church community can model within a non-judgemental culture, modelling love in all walks of life, and acknowledging that life is challenging and tough:

'Be places where everyone is respected, and encouraged and helped to resolve conflict ... Support couples (including same sex) and offer counselling to families to work through difficulties and to find love and forgiveness.'⁵⁷

Relate suggested⁵⁸ that faith groups have a unique opportunity to encourage partners to seek help early to manage and resolve relationship problems. Where groups of people come together to worship there is an opportunity for discussion and supportive spaces for quieter voices to be heard:

'Our faith makes us passionate to help people going through a relationship breakdown – see Isaiah 61 "He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted" ... If the institution of the church could ... get behind supporting difficult and broken relationships more actively, the church would be seen as a much more loving institution and not as judgemental.'⁵⁹

As dialogue and negotiation are at the core of peaceful coexistence, the Church of England, other churches, and other faith groups can help couples and individuals to navigate a challenging journey through conflict resolution and designate places of worship as peace centres.'⁶⁰

Language matters

The Family Solutions Group has emphasised the critical importance of using a language of wellbeing and cooperation, and encouraging a shift towards an integrated response which has safety and wellbeing at its core:

'Changed language will change mind-sets and lay the foundations for improved systems of support for separating families.'⁶²

The Commission endorses the need for a non-litigious language which moves away from the language of 'battle', winning and losing. This will help everyone to understand that separation is not a war to be won, but a shift from that which is harmful to that which is hopeful.

'If grace is the route taken, then it is time to end the silence about family separation. The church should be proclaiming from the rooftops to the world at large that children must be protected from harm, physical or psychological, when parents separate. Some families will need the protection of the family court to find safety, but many families will simply need the helping hand of others around them, which could be a loving faith community, to let go of what has passed and be pointed towards a future in which they and their children can thrive.'⁶¹

⁶¹ Adam, op.cit

⁶² Family Solutions Group (2022) *Language Matters* <https://www.familysolutionsgroup.co.uk/language-matters/>

⁵⁴ McFarlane, A., (2019) Resolution Conference Keynote speech

⁵⁵ See Walker (2022) Briefing paper 5 op.cit.

⁵⁶ Welby, J., (2022) *The Power of Reconciliation*, Bloomsbury Continuum

⁵⁷ Walker and Knights. Briefing Paper 14. op.cit.

⁵⁸ Relate (2022) Supporting Papers | The Church of England

⁵⁹ Briefing Paper 14. op.cit.

⁶⁰ Malcom, E., (2022) Contribution to the Commission from Relate North Thames and Chilterns.

Key Messages from the Commission

In this chapter, our story of change has focused on the ending of couple relationships and the building of new lives apart. This transition is never straightforward and demands patience. It can be harmful, especially for children, but we believe that with the right support it can offer hope for a kinder, and more settled future.

1. When intimate couple relationships flounder, the journey towards separation, divorce and building a new life, can be long, difficult and stressful for everyone concerned.
2. When there are dependent children in the family, parents want to do the best for their children but do not necessarily know how or have the resources to accomplish this.
3. Family separation is always stressful for children in the short term, but it is the level of conflict they witness before, during and after the separation which influence the longer-term impacts which can continue well into adulthood.
4. Children thrive best when their care is consistent and they are able to sustain loving relationships with both parents whenever it is safe to do so. Ongoing conflict has serious negative consequences.
5. Children whose parents are separating need clear, age-appropriate information about the process and to be kept informed throughout.
6. Breaking up is hard to do and parents benefit from comprehensive information about the support and advice available, having an understanding about the consequences for themselves and for their children, and access to a range of support, including counselling, mediation and legal advice, at appropriate times in the journey.
7. Parents need practical advice, guidance and emotional support, and help to understand the needs of their children. There should be a safety-net of support for separating parents and their family.
8. Courts are not the best place to settle difficulties between parents. The legal process of divorce should attempt to minimise the bitterness and hostility between the parties and reduce the trauma for children.
9. The Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020 offers exciting new opportunities to support parents at the beginning of the process of divorce, and to protect the ties between children and their parents.
10. The Church of England is often regarded as unsympathetic and judgemental towards couples whose relationships end. Separating and divorced families can feel unwelcome and uncared for.
11. The Church of England, other churches, and faith communities can play a key role in supporting separating and separated families, acknowledging the stress that they experience, offering a safe space and loving kindness, and providing pathways to peace-building.

12. The language used in the family justice system must be accessible to families and child-friendly. The Church of England, other churches, faith groups, organisations working with families, and government should promote a shift from the language of hostility to the language of peace.

13. The Church of England can model love in all walks of life, acknowledge that life is challenging and tough, and help people to disagree well.

Recommendations

The Commission urges the Church of England:

Through its parishes, deaneries and dioceses

To:

- Renew its focus on supporting families whose relationships are in difficulty.
This could be achieved by actively engaging in peace-building, walking alongside parents and families and helping them to manage conflict well.
- Encourage a pastoral response to separation and divorce with a message of grace and a call to peace for families experiencing a stressful process.
This could be done by making simple resources and prayers available to clergy and other ministers through the Church of England website.

Through the National Church

To:

- Engage closely with government and organisations working with separating families to ensure that children at risk of harm from parental conflict are supported.
This could be achieved by the Church contributing to a network of services for parents and children within communities, including through the use of faith-owned buildings.
- Continue to work through the Church of England's presence in Parliament to press for greater awareness of, and resourcing for the support of children at risk of harm in separating families.
This could be done by promoting collaboration between faith communities, charities and government to create a network of support.
- Encourage the Church to explore the use of The Parents Promise and partner with the Positive Parenting Alliance.

The Commission urges the Government to:

- Develop a cross-departmental relationships strategy, which:
 - provides a coordinated approach to parental separation
 - keeps the child's best interests and wellbeing at the centre
 - is culturally specific
 - promotes a shift from the language of hostility to the language of peace
 - brings together the strands of policy that currently sit with several government departments
- Ensure that the 20-week waiting period within the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020 is used effectively to support families, by:
 - offering a range of information and support services as soon as an application to court is made
 - ensuring that the Separated Parents Information Programme is made available to all parents free of charge at the earliest opportunity during the 20-week waiting period
 - ensuring that appropriate levels of resources, information and support are available across the Family Justice System when parents separate
- Encourage businesses to partner with The Parents Promise, in order to support better outcomes for children when parents part and reduce the number of days lost when parents take time off work due to stress.

6. EVERY CHILD MATTERS

*'Children are precious. The world they must learn to inhabit is one in which they will face hazards and obstacles alongside real and growing opportunities.'*¹

In this and the following chapter the Commission's attention is focused specifically on caring for and supporting children and young people, looking at the factors that enable them to thrive and at those that inhibit their wellbeing. We believe that every single child should be valued, loved and supported to flourish through childhood and beyond, recognising that every child is unique and deserves to have the very best start in life. Our example is Jesus himself, who overtly welcomed children, making it clear that the Kingdom of God belongs to them. He equally clearly warned that failure to care for them is a grave sin.²

So far in our story we have explored the importance of building and sustaining strong, loving couple relationships as the foundation

for family life, and the need to disagree well, reduce conflict and protect children when the relationship between their parents breaks down. The ultimate aim must be to promote and foster loving relationships that stand the test of time and encourage everyone to take steps to save loving relationships wherever possible. However, when it is unsafe to prolong a relationship because of the continued hurt, unhappiness and damage that is being inflicted on family members and when relationships are irreparably damaged, the focus must be on minimising the negative impacts, especially for children.

While knowledge about child development and the needs of children and young people has increased steadily for over half a century, children and childhood have been rather

more neglected areas of study by theologians until relatively recently. This is because the theology of childhood engages with a range of topics which have not been part of traditional theological enquiry:³

'In some areas, work in theology joins that in psychology and child development in identifying patterns in wider culture which need our attention if we are to ensure that childhood is a time of love, care and security.'⁴

So the Commission considered the learning from these disciplines as well as that from theology and social history to think about the needs and aspirations of children and young people today who grow up in a society which is very different from those represented in the Scriptures. While the historical context changes, human desires remain largely unchanged as the Scriptures are applied through fresh eyes. We talked to groups of young people from different parts of the country, different cultural backgrounds and different faiths and no faith about the challenges they face, and their concerns, wishes and dreams for the future.

We sought to untangle the tensions inherent in childhood. On the one hand, from a very young age children today have access to a previously unimaginable range of information, games, entertainment and connectivity at the touch of a button as they grow and develop. On the other hand, young people remain economically and emotionally dependent on adults well into late adolescence and young adulthood for their daily care and protection from exploitation via social media, abuse and deprivation. As Storkey points out:

'That dependency in our own society stretches much further than it did in

biblical times especially in economic terms, as the periods of childhood and adolescence are much longer.'⁵

The implication of the teaching of St Paul in the New Testament is that children should be allowed to be children, and that their immaturity should be honoured. St Paul famously pointed out that when he was a child he thought like a child, understood as a child, and it was not until he became an adult that he put away childish things (1 Corinthians 13 v 11). In the Gospels (Luke 18 16-17) Jesus commends the humility of a child and endorses it. There are indications in our society that children become ever more physically mature at an ever younger age, although elements of immaturity continue into early adulthood.

Young people today are expected to remain in education for far longer now than at any time in history, heavily connected with the increased life expectancy that we now have. This means that young people's economic dependency on their family is considerable. Moreover, the high cost and limited availability of suitable housing often means that young people continue to live with their parent(s) well into adulthood. This undoubtedly presents challenges for parents, families, and for young people themselves. Policies relating to education and parenting, and legislation which governs young people's behaviours, can often seem inconsistent and confusing. Moreover, the longevity of childhood today means that children may grow up in a variety of family structures and be looked after by a number of different parental figures.

It is important to recognise that childhood is not a single, fixed period between birth and adulthood, but refers to a stage of life in which a young person is deemed to require protection and support. The length of childhood is societally

¹ Boateng, P., Chief Secretary to the Treasury (2003) Every Child Matters Cm 5860 Crown Copyright.

² See Storkey, E., (2022) *Meeting God in Matthew*, SPCK, pp63-65

³ Storkey, E., (2022) *A Theology of Childhood*. Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁴ *ibid* p1

⁵ *ibid* p5

determined and is now longer than ever before. Christian theology recognises the relationship between parents and offspring as extending beyond childhood: dependence on parents and an expectation of obedience might end, but the necessity for respect does not. The fifth commandment, to honour one's father and mother, continues as an imperative of family life: it is about care of aged parents as much as about childhood. Other faiths also emphasise this expectation.

We observed the importance of respect for parents in our conversations with pupils at a Muslim girls' school where the young people spoke about their respect for, and trust in their parents to guide them in life, and set values which are practised in school and at home. We were told that their parents are trusted to know their children well enough to assist in finding a suitable partner when the time comes.

This expectation that parents will help in partner selection is not new. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mothers were expected to educate their children and prepare them for life. Our exploration of early nineteenth century discussions about family life found little mention of children, however.⁶

Looking through a historical lens, until at least the mid-nineteenth century, children had little place in society, characterised by them being viewed as property, objects to be moulded and developed for their potential.⁷ For example, it was justified to sell a child when the family were in extreme poverty. In his review of the development of children's rights, Mr Justice MacDonald⁸ noted the beginning of changes in attitudes by 1762 when Rousseau insisted that

childhood had its place in the order of human life, and by 1859 John Stuart Mill recognised that children must be protected⁹, heralding a growing perception of children

'as a unique group that society had the responsibility to maintain and protect from various dangers to which this group was exposed. The child was becoming a person in his or her own right.'¹⁰

Children had always shared in labour in agricultural communities and in household life. With the industrial revolution child labour in factories emerged. Throughout the nineteenth century the whole question of child labour, and limits on it, was debated. Slowly legislation emerged that limited the age of child labour, and the industries in which they could work. Alongside this, the emergence of education for all made a big impact. It was only with the Factory Act of 1878 and the Education Act of 1880 that education became the priority and paid work was abolished for all children under 10.

By the turn of the twentieth century, there was an emerging idealisation of childhood as a distinct stage to be protected. Children's lives became increasingly distinct from adult lives. Literacy increased in this 'golden age' of childhood and the consumption of children's literature increased rapidly.¹¹ The concept of conferring rights on children is linked to the understanding that society benefits from the child developing to his or her full potential physically, emotionally and educationally, such that the health of our society is dependent on the physical, emotional and educational health of our children.¹² If a society is to survive and flourish,



'that society must prioritise and safeguard the life, survival, development, participation and protection of its children in a changing world.'¹³

In 1924, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child were drafted, laying the foundation for the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, (UNCRC) extending the protection of children to encompass the human rights of autonomy, participation and self-expression.

How do we ensure that every child has the best start in life?

'There is now scientific consensus that the period from conception to age five is critical in providing the foundation for future physical and mental health, as well as overall wellbeing and productivity.'¹⁴

As knowledge about child development has increased, successive governments this century

have placed increasing emphasis on the importance of protecting children and young people from adverse experiences and their detrimental impacts, and ensuring that they are able to thrive and reach their potential as adults. This reflects the growing understanding of factors that promote and those that are damaging to children's wellbeing, and the learning from repeated incidents of extreme child abuse.

In 2003, a Green Paper¹⁵ laid out plans to create a society where children are safe, healthy, can enjoy and achieve, reach their full potential, and have access to opportunities. It followed an enquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié¹⁶ which highlighted the need to improve children's care. Sadly, during the life of this Commission in 2021, Star Hobson and Arthur Labinjo-Hughes suffered appalling cruelty at the hands of those responsible for their care. The need to protect children from cruelty and harm remains paramount.

⁶ Williams, papers for the Commission

⁷ See the writings of Plato and Aristotle

⁸ MacDonald, (2018) *The Weight of Memory – Children's Rights in a Changing World* Family Law vol 48, p284 – 293

⁹ Heywood, C.A., (2001) *A History of Childhood*, Polity Press

¹⁰ MacDonald. op.cit.p286

¹¹ Williams. op.cit.

¹² MacDonald. op.cit.

¹³ ibid p285

¹⁴ Ipsos Mori (2020) *State of the Nation: Understanding Public Attitudes to the Early Years*. The Royal Foundation

¹⁵ Every Child Matters. Cm 5860 Crown Copyright

¹⁶ Lord Laming (2003), *The Victoria Climbié Inquiry: report of an inquiry by Lord Laming* ISBN 0101573022, Cm. 5730

In 2010 and again in 2020, the Marmot Review of health inequalities¹⁷ re-emphasised the need to:¹⁸

‘Give every child the best start in life, and enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives.’

In March 2021, the Government presented a vision for the first 1,001 days through pregnancy to the age of two, when the building blocks for lifelong emotional and physical health are laid:¹⁹

‘Imagine living in a world where a vanishingly small number of babies and children need to be taken into care or walking through a city without seeing young teens living rough in the streets. The world in which we all want to live is one where every baby is nurtured to fulfil their potential, where good lifelong emotional wellbeing is the norm, where our society is productive and cooperative, and every one of our citizens has the chance to be the very best that they can be.’²⁰

The vision set a number of action areas, including the provision of seamless support and a welcoming hub for families. *The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood*²¹ has called for a mentally healthier and more nurturing society in which relationships and caregivers are more highly valued. Starting in pregnancy, the mental wellbeing of mothers and fathers should be prioritised while building capacity and capability.

Addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences

‘Psychological trauma, including adverse and traumatic experiences in childhood and adulthood is more common than is often assumed.’²²

A spotlight has been shone on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) which are associated with an increased risk of poor health and other problems in later life.²³ There is no universally agreed definition of ACEs but the Wave Trust has described them as traumatic experiences before the age of 18 which can lead to negative, lifelong emotional and physical outcomes.²⁴ These adverse experiences include: physical, sexual and psychological abuse; physical and psychological neglect; witnessing domestic abuse; having a close family member who has misused drugs or alcohol, has mental health problems, or who has served time in prison; and parental separation and divorce.

All these experiences draw attention to parenting practices and the home environment in which children live. Theologians and social scientists consistently highlight the critical importance of stable early parenting and

‘the problems of dysfunctional relationships and their disruptive, destructive impact in the lives of children.’²⁵

Many other negative circumstances in childhood are associated with poor adult outcomes,

including low birth weight and child disability, economic disadvantage, discrimination and peer victimisation. While ACEs occur across society:

‘they are far more prevalent among those who are poor, isolated or living in deprived circumstances. These social inequalities not only increase the likelihood of ACEs, but also amplify their negative impact.’²⁶

It is very difficult to measure the prevalence of ACEs with any precision and more research and a greater understanding is needed of the ways in which ACEs cluster and impact on adult lives. Nevertheless, the evidence so far suggests that in order to give children a good start in life, it is essential to²⁷:

- find ways to reduce parental conflict
- provide children with the skills to increase their resilience to stress and adversity
- discourage children from using dangerous substances and getting into trouble
- provide them with alternative coping strategies
- improve children’s mental health and wellbeing

The Commission believes that interventions to address these issues need to be embedded within holistic public health policies and strategies. We welcome the more holistic approach to early intervention, as we have seen with policies being developed by government to encourage healthier pregnancies, and a whole family approach to the coordination of support to reduce parental conflict.²⁸

Enhancing the protective effect of families

‘Analysis of family life has not tended to use the word love, which represents a gap between how families see themselves and how they are conceptualised by policy-makers.’²⁹

The Children’s Commissioner has demonstrated a strong correlation between close familial relationships, children’s immediate wellbeing and their longer term outcomes, especially when facing adversity,³⁰ and evidence from the *Millennium Cohort Study* suggests that good parent-child relationships result in children being less likely to exhibit challenging behaviour.³¹

The Children’s Commissioner³² reported four themes that emerged when exploring what family means:

- family is associated with emotions, including love and joy
- family is defined by shared experiences and what people do for one another
- family means unconditional support, trust, care, and a depth of connection
- family means strong, positive and enduring relationships

Children and young people are clear that they want to live in happy homes. That does not deny the fact that there are ‘good days and bad days’, but these are considered normal in family life and can be managed if there are supportive, loving networks surrounding them. If we strive to offer children the best start in life, then

¹⁷ Marmot, M., Goldblatt, P., Allen, J., et al. (2010) *Fair Society Healthy Lives* (The Marmot Review) Institute for Health Equity

¹⁸ Marmot, M., et al. (2020) *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On.*, The Health Foundation

¹⁹ Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (2021) *The Best Start in Life: A vision for the 1001 critical days; The early years Healthy Development Review Report.* CP 419

²⁰ Leadsom, A., Chairman’s Introduction *ibid*

²¹ The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood (2021) *Big Change Starts Small Report* – Centre for Early Childhood

²² Scottish Government (2022) *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Trauma*

²³ Asmussen, K., Fischer, F., Drayton, E., and McBride, T., (2020) *Adverse childhood experiences: what we know, what we don’t know and what should happen next.* Early Intervention Foundation

²⁴ Early Intervention Foundation (2020) *Adverse Childhood Experiences: What we know, what we don’t know, and what should happen next.* EIF

²⁵ Storkey, E., (2022) *op.cit.*

²⁶ Asmussen, et al *op.cit* p3

²⁷ *ibid*

²⁸ Powell, T., Gheera, M., Foster, D., Long, R., and Kennedy, S., (2021) *Early Intervention: policy and provision.* House of Commons Library

²⁹ Children’s Commissioner (2022) *Family Review Part 1* *op.cit* p47

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ Tamura, K., Morrison, J., and Pikhart, H., (2020) *Children’s Behavioural Problems and its Associations with Socioeconomic Position and Early Parenting Environment: Findings from the Millennium Cohort Study.* *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* 29.

³² Children’s Commissioner: *Family Review Part One* *op.cit* p28

the protective effect of family should support children's wellbeing. However, the protective effect of family depends on the quality of family relationships and the extent to which they are loving, strong and enduring. *The Good Childhood Report 2021*, undertaken by *The Children's Society*, showed that children's mean happiness scores for life as a whole, friends, their appearance, and school were significantly lower in 2019-20 than in 2009-10, and concluded that:

'The continuing downward trajectory of children's happiness with life as a whole, and other important indicators, suggests the UK is struggling to create conditions in which all children can thrive.'³³

A year later, the *Good Childhood Report 2022*³⁴ shows that around 1 in 16 children (6%) aged 10 to 15 in the UK are unhappy with their lives, and almost 1 in 8 (12%), an estimated 562,000 of 10-15 year olds, are unhappy with school. More worryingly, the report confirms that young people's wellbeing has become significantly worse over the last decade. The report highlights the importance of addressing the wider social circumstances that influence wellbeing – the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age – and suggests that a focus on place-based prevention and early intervention to promote positive wellbeing for children is vital.

These recent reports indicate the need for reforms of policies and practices relating to parenting, fostering and adoption, education, young people's activities, mental health, and youth justice, all of which are relevant to children's health, security and long-term wellbeing. The Commission has examined these issues in the quest to understand the

opportunities for change and to ensure the protective effect of family is strengthened.

Every parent matters – caring for children

'If we really want to help families, so we can help children, we must look at parenting. We all know how important parents – including, of course, carers – are and the role they play to improve their children's lives. Parents know more than anyone the challenges of bringing up children. They want to do what is best for their children to grow up happy and healthy, to do well at school and to ensure everyone in the family gets on.'³⁵

Bringing up children is one of the most important tasks adults perform. A high value is placed on 'good' parenting and on both parents being involved in parental activities that support positive child development. The research evidence highlights that a child's home and family environment, the quality of the relationship between the child and each parent, and the relationship between the parents are all factors influencing child development. This evidence holds true irrespective of family structure and parenting arrangements, including homes in which children are not being brought up by heterosexual parents:

'The families of non-heterosexual parents challenge previously accepted definitions of parenthood, unsettle conventional views about family relationships, and question deeply held beliefs about the importance of biological linkages in family lives.'³⁶

Studies of children growing up with parents of the same-sex have found no significant differences in child outcomes, adjustment, behaviour, gender development, wellbeing and self-esteem as a function of parental sexual orientation. Moreover, parental mental health was not associated with parental sexual orientation.³⁷ Children born to or adopted by same-sex parents are as likely as other children to thrive.³⁸ The focus is clearly on relationship quality and family stability.

As these fundamental shifts occur across the globe, it is increasingly important to ensure that all parents are offered the appropriate support that will enable them and their children to flourish in a loving, stable home. Every child is unique and human uniqueness is biblically affirmed and attributed to God's personal creative love and care (Psalm 139 v 13). However, the needs of children are universal:

'Parents are called to pass on good values for living, to love and nurture their children and establish boundaries and discipline in appropriate ways. The sensitive upbringing of children and the task of education are integral issues to a theology of childhood.'³⁹

Becoming a parent is a delight and joy for most but it is not always a happy event. Sometimes it can put enormous strain on the parents' own intimate relationship and threaten the stability of the family unit before, during or after the birth of a baby. This is why the Commission has recommended that parents should receive as much information and support as possible in the preparation for becoming parents and in the months that follow. Many new parents would benefit from help, understanding and support. The Church of England and other

faith communities, including in partnership with schools, have an opportunity to support and help all parents as they undertake their responsibilities. Support through good quality parenting courses is invaluable. Huge numbers of churches and faith communities already offer support through running, or hosting, parent/carer and baby/toddler groups. All of this is to be encouraged. Where parents bring children for baptism there is also a further opportunity to explore with them the commitments they are making as parents to their child. Thought should be given to linking *The Parents Promise*⁴⁰ with such preparation.

Organisations such as *Daniel's Den* can be a lifeline for new parents who are feeling isolated in London, offering a warm welcome and a place to belong. Much of their work centres on perinatal mental health support for mothers and fathers. We believe that local churches could benefit by working with organisations such as this to support families in their local area.

³³ The Children's Society (2021) *The Good Childhood Report* <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2021>

³⁴ The Children's Society (2022) *The Good Childhood Report* <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2022>

³⁵ Children's Commissioner (2022) *Family Review Part 2: A positive approach to parenting*. Children's Commissioner for England.

³⁶ Patterson, C.J., Riskind, R.G., and Tornello, S.L., (2014) *Sexual Orientation, Marriage and Parenthood: A global perspective* in Abela and Walker (eds) op.cit.

³⁷ ibid

³⁸ Tasker, F.L., and Patterson, C.J., (2007) Research on gay and lesbian parenting: retrospect and prospect. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 3: 9-34

³⁹ Storkey, op.cit. p7

⁴⁰ Discussed in Ch 5.

Daniel's Den

Daniel's Den, a parent and toddler group, was set up 25 years ago to support new parents living in London, a place where it is often difficult to feel a sense of community. Its vision is to offer a warm welcome to all families and help them to find a sense of belonging, often focusing on perinatal mental health. Daniel's Den attracts new parents from a wide range of nationalities, many of whom can experience particular isolation if their English skills are limited. We were reminded by Daniel's Den that parents often prefer to draw on support from the voluntary sector, as opposed to statutory services, as well as the importance of toddler groups to support young children and their parents. Daniel's Den has a vision of having a toddler group within walking distance of every family.

Loving and belonging

In our Call for Evidence we asked people to think about the factors that protect children and young people and those that prohibit their wellbeing. Unsurprisingly, the key protective factor mentioned was 'love.'⁴¹

'Children being loved and cared for in a safe environment. Good parenting.'⁴²

Strong emphasis was placed on family stability and on parents providing a happy home environment, where they are able to give time to their children. This implies investment in parenting so that parents are able to nurture children in their early years. This is essential for children being able to thrive:

'Children and young people need to feel safe and secure. Not only do they need appropriate housing and provision of basic essentials including heating and good nutrition, but it is also vital that they experience safe, secure and consistent relationships. This means they need consistent caregivers with whom they can

build a strong attachment, and who have quality time to give them.'⁴³

The factors which undermine positive parenting were described as being:

'Instability, insecurity, inconsistency of parental relationships.'

Instability and insecurity will almost certainly be linked to inadequate parenting, poor quality relationships and inconsistent care:

'An absence of consistent, secure, nurturing relationships is a significant threat to early childhood development. Factors such as poverty, domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental illness (among others) can impair early relationships and thus make it more difficult for a baby to thrive.'

Recurring themes about the negative impacts on family functioning included parental conflict, domestic abuse, mental illness, substance abuse and poverty. These difficulties often come in multiple, cumulative clusters that further inhibit the protective effect of family and render

it increasingly difficult for children to flourish:

'Factors tend to pile on top of each other: drug and alcohol abuse obviously come with broken families, physical and sexual violence, mental problems, unstable or suboptimal living conditions, under-performance at school, unemployment or criminality and of course financial distress.'

These negative factors create an environment which is immensely challenging for parents and their children to overcome. There are many biblical stories illustrating that when parents are in conflict and when families fracture, children suffer, not least because their vulnerability increases. For example, Ishmael was put at enormous risk in the wilderness because of the actions of adults with power, and his mother was unable to save him. Only through God's intervention does the child receive protection and care (Genesis 21).⁴⁴

Difficulties in meeting basic needs underpinned many of the concerns expressed to us about poor parenting, mental health issues and the possibility of children experiencing abuse and neglect. The Children's Commissioner has listed a number of challenges that have been shown to undermine the protective effect of family in the child's life.⁴⁵ These include mental and physical illness; intense family conflict; parental separation; alcohol and substance abuse; and unstable accommodation and homelessness.

Mental health conditions and family functioning

A clear link has been observed between mental health conditions and poor family functioning. In 2019–2020 about one third of children in England were living with at least one parent experiencing anxiety and depression.⁴⁶ Moreover, NHS England has pointed out that perinatal mental illness affects up to 27 per cent of expectant and new mothers and is more prevalent in areas of high deprivation. Many fathers also suffer from post-natal depression, and some 10 per cent of new fathers experience mental health issues in the perinatal period.⁴⁷ The MBRRACE-UK (Mothers and Babies: Reducing Risk through Audit and Confidential Enquiries) 2022 report indicates that 1.5 women per 100,000 who gave birth in 2022 died by suicide during or in the six months after the birth. This is three times the rate in the period from 2017 to 2019.⁴⁸

The NHS has reported that one in four adults and one in ten children experience mental health conditions.⁴⁹ Research tells us that 50 per cent of all mental health conditions start by age 15, and 75 per cent by age 18; and the common mental health conditions of anxiety and depression emerge during the second decade of a child's life.⁵⁰ Mental health conditions in children are quite common, with about one in ten children aged 5–16 diagnosed each year.⁵¹ These can include eating disorders, self-harm, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and ADHD (attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder). Some 13 per cent of

⁴¹ Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: *Briefing Six Children and Young People: factors promoting and prohibiting their wellbeing*. Briefing Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁴² This and the following comments are included in Briefing Six op.cit

⁴³ *ibid*

⁴⁴ Storkey, op.cit.

⁴⁵ Children's Commissioner (2022) Family Review Part 1 op.cit.

⁴⁶ Office for Mental Health Improvement and Disparities, (2022), *Statistical commentary; children living with parents in emotional stress*, cited in Children's Commissioner op.cit.p59

⁴⁷ NHS England (2022) *Perinatal Mental Health*, cited in Children's Commissioner, O-.cit p59

⁴⁸ HBRRACE-UK (2022) *Saving Lives, Improving Mothers' Care Lessons learned to inform maternity care from the UK and Ireland Confidential Enquiries into Maternal Deaths and Morbidity 2018 – 20*

⁴⁹ NHS Factsheet (November 2022)

⁵⁰ Goodyer, I, M., (2022) *Mental Health and Psychotherapy in the UK Today: Implications for Clergy*. Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁵¹ Nip in the Bud (2021) *Child Mental Health Conditions* https://nipinthebud.org/child-mentalhealthconditions/?gclid=CjwKCAjw9qITBhBbEiwAp-GE0ftBJudZocdXxs64E-rRYOPJIZ3-XhV4iuAwpOSRfTmtQuhJRdzixQCqsAQAvD_BwE

children and young people aged 5–19 meet the clinical criteria for a mental health disorder, and in 2021 one in six children had a probable mental health disorder, an increase from one in nine in 2017.⁵²

The Children's Commissioner has reported that 20 per cent of children who responded to the *Big Ask*⁵³ said they were worried about their mental health, it was their biggest worry overall, and they would like someone to talk to when they are worried.

Coram⁵⁴ has found that:

- children are more likely to have poor mental health if they experience some forms of adversity such as living in poverty, parental separation or financial crisis
- young people who identify as LGBTIQ+ are

more likely to experience mental health conditions

- children in the social care system are four times more likely than their peers to experience mental health disorders
- the number of children referred to mental health services rose from 97,342 in the period April to June 2019 to 190,271 children in the same period in 2021

The Commission on Young Lives has reported that although over 400,000 children and young people are being treated for mental health problems every month:

'When trying to access mental health services, children and young people face rejected referrals, long waiting services, shortages of staff, mental health stigma and racism in accessing support.'⁵⁵

⁵² NHS Digital (2021) *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2021* <https://digital.nhs.uk/publications/statistical/2021-f>.

⁵³ Children's Commissioner for England (2022) *The Big Ask*

⁵⁴ Coram, submission to the Commission. November 2022.

⁵⁵ Commission on Young Lives: (2022), *'Hidden in Plain Sight: A national plan of action to support vulnerable teenagers to succeed and to protect them from adversity, exploitation and harm'*



This unacceptable situation was underscored by Coram, who told us that:

- in 2019 specialist services turned away one in four children referred to them for treatment
- around 75 per cent of young people with mental health problems wait so long for help that their condition inevitably worsens

Children and young people are affected by the health and functioning of all the members of their family, and maternal health is recognised as a central risk factor for children's psychopathology.⁵⁶ *The Royal Foundation*⁵⁷ has observed that:

'Maternal depression, particularly during pregnancy and during the first year or two of a child's life, interferes with a mother's ability to interact with her child and to provide protection from other sources of stress, and this, in turn, has been shown to affect a child's stress response.'

Moreover, these effects link maternal depression to the child's own risk of developing depression and other emotional disorders. Factors in the home environment strongly influence a child's cognitive, socio-emotional and educational outcomes at the age of five,⁵⁸ with the parents' level of warmth having the strongest association with personal, social and emotional development.⁵⁹

Alcohol and drug addiction

Some half a million children live with a parent who is dependent on alcohol or drugs.⁶⁰ Substance abuse often links with other family stressors including housing and financial instability, mental health problems, and crime. Substance abuse reduces family functioning and therefore has negative impacts on children.⁶¹ The NHS digital survey has found that among 11–16 year olds, those with a probable mental disorder were twice as likely to report problems with family functioning.⁶² The Commission on Young Lives has recommended that there should be mental health and wellbeing training for all professionals working with children and young people, and improvements in the provision of early intervention support.⁶³

Witnessing domestic abuse

The most common factor identified at the end of Children in Need assessments relates to children witnessing abuse between their parents. This affected some 168,960 children in England in 2020–2021.⁶⁴ Moreover, children who witnessed domestic abuse at home at age three reported higher than average anti-social behaviours at age 14.⁶⁵ The Children's Commissioner has emphasised the significant negative effect on children of witnessing abuse in the home. Children exposed to violence are more likely to have difficulty in school, abuse drugs or alcohol,

⁵⁶ Goodman, S.H., Rouse, M.H., Connell, A.M., Broth, M.R., Hall, C.M., & Heyward, D., (2011). *Maternal depression and child Psychopathology: A meta-analytic review*. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology review*, 14, 1–27.]

⁵⁷ The Royal Foundation. op.cit

⁵⁸ Melhuish, E., and Gardiner, J., (2020) *Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age five years [PDF] Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): impact study on early education use and child outcomes up to age three*. Research report: DFE-RR706 | Semantic Scholar

⁵⁹ Children's Commissioner: Family Survey Part 2 op.cit.

⁶⁰ Children's Commissioner: Family Survey Part 1. op.cit.

⁶¹ Department for Work and Pensions (2021), *Examination of the links between parental conflict and substance misuse and the impacts on children's outcomes* www.gov.uk

⁶² NHS Digital (2021) *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England*

⁶³ Commission on Young Lives op.cit.

⁶⁴ Department of Education (2021) *Characteristics of Children in Need 2020–2021* Characteristics of children in need, Reporting year 2022 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)

⁶⁵ Action for Children (2019) *Support for children affected by domestic abuse*

act aggressively, suffer from depression or other mental health problems and engage in criminal behaviour as adults. Moreover, the NSPCC has found that 25 per cent of girls and 18 per cent of boys aged between 13 and 17 had experienced physical violence themselves from an intimate partner.⁶⁶

Surveys by Women's Aid have shown that some of those experiencing domestic abuse had done so for up to 20 years, indicating that some children witness repeated domestic abuse throughout their childhood.⁶⁷ Between 40 and 60 per cent of women experiencing domestic violence are abused during pregnancy. Moreover, poverty increases the incidents of abuse.⁶⁸

It is well known that reporting domestic abuse is difficult for many people: they may feel ashamed, worry that they may be to blame, or are frightened of the consequences and further abuse. While some of those abused may never report it to the police, most do not do so at the start and tend to wait until the situation becomes intolerable for them or their children. Global Majority Heritage women who are abused may never report it to the police for a variety of reasons, including concerns about stigma on their wider family or community, language difficulties and feeling distrustful of the police.⁶⁹

Exposure to domestic abuse has a devastating impact on children and young people: they may continue to experience mental and physical health problems throughout their childhood and into adulthood. Yet the Commission was told that support services for children and young people are patchy:

'Barnardo's own practitioners also report a lack of specialist support services for these extremely vulnerable and traumatised children and that it is also getting worse.'⁷⁰

Some mental health service providers, for example, exclude children living in families where there is domestic abuse between the parents. Barnardo's have commented that:

'All children and young people need to be able to access specialist, trauma informed domestic abuse support. This support must be available for those who are living in a household where there is domestic abuse and for those young people experiencing abuse within their intimate relationships.'⁷¹

The Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales told the Commission that working at local level is necessary to tackle domestic abuse, and working in partnership with the Church of England and other faith communities would be welcome.

The Commission heard first-hand from women and men who had experienced abuse and were supported by a domestic abuse service (IDAS) which takes a whole family approach, offering support to children witnessing abuse.⁷² Sexual violence has a devastating impact on individuals and families, affecting many areas of a victim's life, so IDAS takes a holistic approach to support, considering the wider determinants of healing, including previous trauma, poverty, gender identity issues, isolation, and mental and physical ill health.

Independent Domestic Abuse Services (IDAS)

IDAS is the largest specialist organisation in Yorkshire, providing support for anyone who is, or has been, subject to domestic abuse or sexual violence. During the Commission's visits to York, several members had the opportunity to visit IDAS, learn about the services offered, and meet with people who have drawn on the services they provide. We were privileged to hear their personal stories, and humbled by the extent of the trauma and pain that had impacted their lives for many years. We heard how the IDAS Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVA) had been instrumental in helping them move forward:

'What I valued most was the inclusive, safe, non-judgemental space she [ISVA] consistently provided. Whatever state I arrived in, I left in a far better place ... This skilful ability to ground me back to the purpose of 'finding my voice' was so empowering.'

IDAS has developed a Domestic Abuse Whole Family Approach (DAWFA) which directly supports children and young people impacted by domestic abuse, while working with the non-abusive parent and wider family members or support networks to help families recover from the trauma of abuse, develop resilience, and re-build their lives. Abused parents have often been undermined by their abuser, which can affect their ability to parent effectively. IDAS practitioners encourage parents to see what they are doing right, rather than what they may have been told or believe that they have 'failed' to do. The aim is to empower people to set and achieve their goals.

IDAS has developed a number of strengths-based, trauma informed services that both empower individuals and support families to build on their unique assets. Specialist Children's Workers and Independent Domestic Abuse Advisors work together to address the inter-connecting issues faced by children, young people, and their parent or carer. The Specialist Children's Worker also acts as "Lead Professional" to ensure that there is a co-ordinated, multi-agency response to support planning. Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs) work with clients of all ages. When supporting younger children, the ISVA works in partnership with parents or carers to help them support their child.

IDAS works closely with York Diocese, providing training events for officers of the church to recognize and respond appropriately to disclosures of domestic and sexual abuse and violence. IDAS has been commissioned by the York Diocese to provide independent support to victims and survivors of faith abuse.

⁶⁶ James, E., (2020) *Not just Collateral Damage The hidden impact of domestic abuse on children*. Barnardos

⁶⁷ Women's Aid <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/the-impact-of-domestic-abuse/>

⁶⁸ McManus, S. and Scott, S. (DMSS Research) with Sosenko, F. (Heriot-Watt University). (2016) *Joining the dots: The combined burden of violence, abuse and poverty in the lives of women*. Published online

⁶⁹ Thiara, R.K. and Roy, S. (2012) *Vital Statistics 2 Key Findings Report on Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Refugee women and children facing violence and abuse*. Imkaan

⁷⁰ James, E., op.cit. p25

⁷¹ *ibid* p27

⁷² Duarte, E. (2022) Supporting Papers I www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

Supporting children on the edge of care

'Our faith makes children a priority. Jesus welcomed little children and blessed them. He encourages us to do the same.'⁷³

For some families, parenting struggles become so hard that children are on the edge of being removed from their birth parents/carers. Commission members heard from and visited *Safe Families*,⁷⁴ an initiative developed in 2012 which offers a life-line to families struggling to cope and to parent well. Drawing on the resources of local faith communities, *Safe Families*, a registered charity, works in partnership with faith leaders

and local authorities around the country to offer short-term intervention for children and young people on the edge of care. It works with some 1,500 families each year, and over 18,000 families have benefitted in the last ten years. Volunteer host families, recruited primarily through local faith communities, offer short periods of respite care. The charity's mission is to improve the lives of vulnerable families. *Safe Families* offers support, hope and belonging to improve the lives of families in local communities, with local volunteers who can offer them help and support. It is an excellent example of local communities, local authorities and local churches working together based on five core values: love, belonging, faith, empowerment and humility.⁷⁵

Safe Families

Offering support, hope and belonging to people who might otherwise be facing life alone, *Safe Families* partners with churches to introduce children, young people and families to trained volunteers who provide a community of support. Based on the principle that 'everyone deserves to belong' the volunteers, who are primarily from Christian churches, build friendships with families helping stabilise things as they overcome difficulties and learn new parenting skills.

The support is delivered through churches who partner with *Safe Families* to recruit and train volunteers from within their congregations; these volunteers then receive support and encouragement with coaching, input and safeguarding from *Safe Families* professional staff.

Safe Families meet the families they work with through their partnerships with local authorities in over 50 areas of the UK. Many of the local authorities working with *Safe Families* have demonstrated a reduction of the flow of children into local authority care of between 8%-18%, transforming families and reducing pressure on public finances.

Child abuse and neglect

'How can we journey with hurting, struggling families?' To which we would offer: forming trusted relationships over a long period of time; being present; being involved/included in networked support training.'⁷⁶

Sadly, some parents are unable to protect their children from harm or offer appropriate care. A combination of challenges such as mental health conditions, substance misuse and domestic abuse may combine to render children in danger of harm. Unstable relationships within families, mental health challenges and poverty can also put children at risk of abuse and neglect. The Children's Commissioner indicated that in England in 2020-2021 there were 219,190 children registered as 'children in need' because of abuse or neglect, and another 50,010 children on child protection plans because they were at risk of suffering significant harm.⁷⁷

'The impact of child abuse and neglect on children is profound, and associated with worse mental health, educational outcomes and social outcomes. Sometimes it will be possible to work with families to keep the children safe, but for many of these children it will be necessary for them to live away from home to stay safe.'⁷⁸

The NSPCC reports that half a million children in the UK suffer abuse every year. The NSPCC indicates that 1 in 10 children have experienced neglect.⁷⁹ The NSPCC defines neglect as 'the ongoing failure to meet a child's basic needs' and the most common form of child abuse. A child might be left hungry or dirty, or without proper clothing, shelter, supervision or health

care. This can put children and young people in danger, and it can also have long term effects on their physical and mental wellbeing.⁸⁰ They consider four kinds of neglect: physical neglect when a child's basic physical needs are not met; educational neglect when a child is not receiving an appropriate education; emotional neglect when the child does not receive the nurture, stimulation and loving care that is needed; and medical neglect when a child does not receive the health and dental care needed for a healthy development.

Being neglected can have serious short and long-term effect including mental health issues, running away from home, and getting involved in drugs or criminal activities. While any child can be neglected, the NSPCC points to certain groups of children being more at risk than others. These include: children born prematurely; those with a disability or complex health needs; children in care; and asylum seekers.

Respondents to our Call for Evidence stressed the support that faith communities can offer parents, including loving and healing and working in partnership with schools and social services. Respondents agreed that child abuse and neglect are issues that should be talked about more, that everyone should be aware of the signs of possible child neglect, that support should be offered in a non-judgemental way, and that faith groups should work in partnership with others.

As Storkey⁸¹ has pointed out:

'Children are seen as those who trust. In Matthew 18, Jesus refers to 'little ones' who believe in him and signifies the need for

⁷³ Respondent to the Call for Evidence Briefing 14.

⁷⁴ *Safe Families*. <https://safefamilies.uk/>

⁷⁵ Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁷⁶ Briefing Paper Number Eight. Briefing Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁷⁷ Department of Education (2021) *Characteristics of children in need 2020-2021*

⁷⁸ *Children's Commissioner Family Review Part One* op.cit p62

⁷⁹ See: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/neglect/>

⁸⁰ *ibid*

⁸¹ Storkey, op.cit.

adults to respect and honour their trust. The trust of a child should not be violated, either emotionally, relationally, keeping promises or in how we teach them. Children should be able to trust adults to be caring, kind, respectful, faithful and truthful. We know from experience and much evidence that children who have suffered abuse from those they trusted can struggle for a lifetime to find full healing. They can also find it difficult to trust others.'

When parents are unable to provide appropriate care

'Consider that some of the parents who neglect have many traumas and issues such as abuse and additional needs, and their support might need to start with their own healing.'⁸²

Meeting children's needs, their welfare and wellbeing, must always be paramount. However hard parents try to do the best for their children there are some who cannot provide the level of care that children need. In these circumstances, the best interests of a child may be to be removed from their birth parent(s). In September 2022, the Children's Commissioner reported that 80,850 children in England were being looked after by the state. This number includes 4,070 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.⁸³

Coram has reported⁸⁴ that of the 80,000+ children in care in England on 31 March 2021:

- 71% (57,330) were living with foster carers (16% in a foster placement with a relative or a friend, 56% with a foster carer who is not a relative or a friend)
- 14% (11,550) were living in secure units, children's homes or semi-independent living

- 7% (5,910) were placed with their parents
- 3% (2,270) were placed for adoption
- 2% (1,860) were living independently or in residential employment
- 70% of looked after children had one placement in the year, 21% had two placements, and 9% had three or more placements.

The majority of children come into care as a result of abuse or neglect or because of family dysfunction. About a third of children are aged between one and nine, and almost two thirds are aged over ten. White Irish Traveller/Gypsy/Roma children, and children in Mixed Other, Mixed White/Black Caribbean and Black African ethnic groups are over-represented in the care system.

There were more children in care in 2019/20 than in 2009/10, and the numbers are predicted to increase. These children will have experienced a range of traumatic experiences which render them in need of caring, loving homes. The vast majority, while no longer living with their birth parents, still live in a family setting, either with other relatives, or with a foster family, or with adoptive parents. Where it is safe to do so, however, efforts are made to ensure that children do not lose contact with their birth parents while they are in the care system. The Children's Commissioner's *Big Ask*⁸⁵ survey reported that many children in care express a strong desire to see more of their biological family.

The majority of children in care who live with a foster family are able to form loving and trusting relationships and develop a sense of security and belonging, but not all placements are successful and some children experience repeated moves and disruptions in their care. It is harder to find a suitable placement for some children, often

because they have higher needs due to ill health or a disability. Some children find themselves living in a residential institution, and while every effort is made to care for these children and young people, they inevitably miss out on the security of being surrounded by strong loving family relationships.

Adoption

'When finding a home for a child in care, our obsession must be putting relationships around them that are loving and lasting.'⁸⁶

Adoption is the way that some children can enjoy the love, support and stability of a family for life. In 2021, 2,870 children were adopted from care. The average age was just over three years and white children were significantly more likely than black and asian children to be adopted. Black children, older children and those with additional needs wait the longest to find a family. Kandiah⁸⁷ has argued that:

'Adoption should not be framed as a way for families to find children – this can lead to a consumerist approach where children are made to be the answer for a couple's infertility, family completion or personal fulfilment. Instead, adoption should be portrayed as a way for children to find the families they need.'

The Commission agrees with this view and it has been the position which has long been taken by the Church of England. Adoption offers the opportunity for a child to enjoy the security and stability of a loving home and the focus must always be on supporting and promoting the wellbeing and happiness of the child. We

believe that adoption policy should reflect this approach.

A new approach – transforming the care system

'The capacity to care is the thing which gives life its deepest significance.'⁸⁸

In 2021, the first part of the *Independent Review of Children's Social Care* set out the urgent need for a new approach to children's social care in England.⁸⁹ It had reported poor outcomes in terms of health, education, unemployment, criminal justice, and homelessness in adulthood. For example, 25 per cent of people who are homeless have been in care at some point in their lives. Not only do these poorer outcomes have a high personal cost, they have a high cost to society. The Chair of the review noted that:

'One of our most fundamental obligations to children in care should be that they grow up and grow old with a strong, loving tribe of people around them.'⁹⁰

The message yet again is about the critical importance of children living in a loving, stable family environment in order to flourish. The conclusion reached by the Independent Review was that fundamental change is needed:

'This moment is a once in a generation opportunity to reset children's social care. What we need is a system that provides intensive help to families in crisis, acts decisively in response to abuse, unlocks the potential of wider family networks to raise children, puts lifelong loving relationships at the heart of the care system and lays the

⁸² Briefing Paper Number Eight op.cit.

⁸³ Children's Commissioner Family Review Part 1. op.cit.

⁸⁴ Coram BAAF (2022) <https://corambaaf.org.uk/resources/statistics/statistics-england>

⁸⁵ Children's Commissioner for England (2021) *The Big Answer*. Children's Commissioner for England

⁸⁶ MacAlister op.cit Executive Summary

⁸⁷ Kandiah, K., (2022) *The Church and Children in Care*. Supporting Papers I www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁸⁸ Pablo Casals: Cellist and peace-builder 1876-1973

⁸⁹ MacAlister, J., (2021) *The Case for Change: The Independent Review of Children's Social Care*. https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/IRCSC_The_Case_for_Change_27.05.22.pdf

⁹⁰ *ibid.* p3

foundations for a good life for those who have been in care.’⁹¹

The review⁹² subsequently argued for a radical reset of the system which starts with the recognition that loving relationships hold the solution for children and families overcoming adversity. The Children’s Commissioner has argued that all children must be able to find love, stability, strong relationships, support and time together within a family, and that being in care should not be a reason for any child not to have this experience and not to benefit from the protective effect of family. Our Commission endorses these views.

These loving, protective relationships can be provided by kinship carers, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters, many of whom already provide care for family members. The review demands far greater recognition and support for kinship carers than

currently, and argues that before a child is placed into care there should be consideration of whether a family network, together with a comprehensive support package, can offer appropriate kinship care.

The ambition is for a Family Help multidisciplinary team to provide support, based in community settings, such as schools and Family Hubs and family homes. This ambition echoes the support being offered by *Safe Families* and by other agencies working in the community to offer support to families. The Commission met with *Children North East* (CNE),⁹³ a charity which has been providing community support to children and families since 1891, including therapeutic services, mental health support, youth work, family support, domestic abuse services, community-based support, and consultations with young people.

The vision from the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care is to transform the care system:

‘The quality and number of loving relationships every child has, whilst in care and when leaving care, should be the primary measure used to determine the success of the care system. Making relationships our focus will reduce brothers and sisters being separated through care, ensure unaccompanied asylum seeking children have networks to support them through adulthood, and set young people leaving care up with the best possible chance of having a good adult life.’⁹⁴

To achieve this vision and radically improve the experience of social care and the outcomes for children, appropriate support needs to be provided to families long before children are at the edge of care and before any family reaches crisis point. The Independent Review has set ten objectives for the social care system⁹⁵ which focus on:

- supporting children to thrive within their own family or within their wider family network
- protecting children from abuse and maltreatment
- all children in care having a loving, high-quality home that is as close as possible to a family environment and that provides stability in their local community

The review also set five ambitious missions so that care-experienced young people secure: loving relationships; quality education; a decent home; fulfilling work; and good health, as the foundations for a good life.

Our Commission fully endorses all the objectives and ambitious missions set out by the review. We welcome the announcement by the Government in February 2023 to pilot changes to the children’s social care system in response to the review. We particularly welcome the promise that: children taken into care in England will be placed close to their family and friends rather than being housed hundreds of miles away; earlier help will be available for families in crisis; there will be more help for kinship carers; local child protection teams will be strengthened; young people’s experience of the care system will be improved; and there will be plans to tackle the chronic staff shortages of children’s social workers. These changes will begin the journey to reset the children’s social care system.

The Commission urges full implementation of the MacAlister recommendations as soon as possible. We welcome the Secretary of State for Education’s commitment to transforming children’s lives for the better and the focus on ‘what really matters to children – family, love and a safe, stable and reliable place to call home.’⁹⁶

We believe that children in care deserve the same love and stability as everyone else, and that all children should be supported to be: healthy; safe; happy; able to learn; and that children feel engaged in a community.⁹⁷ The following message from a care-experienced young person was given to family justice professionals.⁹⁸

‘Give us the right support and help us to help others and we will surprise you and help you do better for children and young people.’

Children North East

Children North East is a charity that exists to ensure all babies, children and young people grow up happy and healthy. It delivers services, support and initiatives that provide a platform for children, young people and families to work through issues, take action, and provide them with the tools to reach their full potential. Its ambitious vision has a strong children’s rights ethos at its heart and it believes every young person has the right to feel safe, loved, valued and confident, and resilient to the challenges they may face. The charity offers therapeutic services, mental health support, youth work, family support, domestic abuse services, community-based support, and consultations with young people. Its Poverty Proofing[©] services provide an innovative tool for identifying the barriers those living in poverty face in the context of schools, healthcare, early years provision and access to cultural activities.

⁹¹ MacAlister, J., (2022) *The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care* <https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Executive-summary.pdf>

⁹² Macalister (2022) op.cit.

⁹³ Children North East. <https://children-ne.org.uk/who-we-are/what-we-do/>

⁹⁴ MacAlister, (2022) p 112 op.cit.

⁹⁵ ibid. p196-7

⁹⁶ Secretary of State for Education (2023) *Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation*, Children’s Social Care Reform 2023.CP 780

⁹⁷ Children’s Commissioner (2022) *Family Survey Part Two*. op.cit.

⁹⁸ FJYPB (2022) *In our shoes* p56 Shared Press

Mill Grove Community

Mill Grove is the name of a Christian household. It began with the informal foster care of a little girl in 1899. Since then, more than 1,000 children have lived there, and in time it became seen as a voluntary children's home. It is now the home of an extended kinship network, where members of the family live alongside children and parents who need support and accommodation. Here Christians share their lives with children and young people in this setting of love and care. A representative from Mill Grove, who was also an adviser on our theological work stream, shared how Scripture has been a key resource in shaping the place over four generations. It has become an inclusive setting that welcomes orphans, widows and strangers irrespective of differences; a community that trusts God for its daily bread; and a place that lives, breathes and shares Good News. As such, it is not only part of the Church, but also a working model of the household of God, in which the dynamics and shape are challenged and changed as each new child is welcomed in the name of Jesus.

Leaving care

When children in care reach the age of 18, they may find themselves without the support of a family and facing a cliff-edge. The data show that 69 per cent of care leavers do not have any active or recognised family relationships.⁹⁹ There is a huge gap in support which was illustrated during the Commission's conversations with care leavers¹⁰⁰ who spoke movingly of a lack of supportive networks, not having anywhere to live, not feeling safe, and a lack of understanding amongst professionals of the importance of family connectedness. These outcomes are often amplified by brothers and sisters having been split up by the care system, thereby fracturing the natural support and protection that family members can offer each other.

The Chief Executive of Coram has told the Commission that if every opportunity to provide the best possible care for our children and young people is not taken now then 'we are sleepwalking into a crisis' in which their ability to flourish will be severely hindered.¹⁰¹

In the Commission's search to find examples where positive outcomes are promoted, we engaged with the Mill Grove Christian Charitable Trust¹⁰² which began as a children's home in 1899. Many of the young people continue to regard Mill Grove as their 'family home' long after they have left.

⁹⁹ Kandiah, op.cit.

¹⁰⁰ House of Lords seminar organised by Baroness Young of Hornsey. November 2022

¹⁰¹ Carol Homden, Chief Executive, Coram, presentation to the Commission, March 2022.

¹⁰² Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households



Young carers – hidden from view

There are significant numbers of children and young people who themselves are providing care for another member of the family. Many young carers look after a family member, often a parent or another sibling, with a mental or physical health issue, who is disabled or has an addiction. These young carers tend to be hidden from public view and yet they provide daily physical care and emotional support and undertake many household tasks while attempting to keep up with their school work. They may be consistently late or absent from school, underfed, tired and have to lie about their personal situations because they are deeply afraid of the consequences. Such young carers may become exposed to criminal gangs or commit crimes if they need money or other resources and have no legitimate means to obtain them. Young carers can be very good at making themselves invisible

and therefore we have to actively look for them in order to provide support and protection. Their trust issues may be much more difficult to resolve because of the intense responsibility they have taken on.¹⁰³

The Children's Society has estimated that there are more than 800,000 young carers in the UK and that 27 per cent of those aged between 11 and 15 either miss school or have educational difficulties due to their caring responsibilities. Furthermore, one in three young carers has a mental health issue.¹⁰⁴ Often schools are completely unaware that pupils have caring roles. Local Authorities are expected to identify and assess the support needs of young carers, but if families do not disclose these issues they may be hard to reach by agencies offering support. Young carers are often invisible in society generally and even more so in military families because of the stigma and fear associated with revealing a need for care in the

¹⁰³ Anne Richards in conversation with the Commission

¹⁰⁴ The Children's Society (2020) *Hidden from view: the experiences of young carers*

family.¹⁰⁵ In these circumstances, young carers learn to be invisible, sometimes they lie about their caring role and develop particular skills of concealment.

Young carers may feel stressed, tired, and worried both about their role and also about exposure. In order to support and come alongside young carers we need to be especially vigilant and able to spot when a young person may be hiding in plain sight. The Children's Society offers a range of support for young carers, including a young carers' festival. Being cared for themselves and belonging to a peer group that understands their experiences is enormously important.

The role of faith communities

'Jesus said, "Suffer the little children to come to me for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." Young children display many of the attributes which we are told to strive for (e.g. honesty, trust). Children should be respected and supported to enable them to achieve their potential within a loving, supportive family and society.'¹⁰⁶

The Commission heard about a number of initiatives in local churches designed to support parents to support children.¹⁰⁷ The Church of England, other churches and faith communities are encouraged to talk openly about difficulties in parenting which most families face at some time or other, and to acknowledge mental health challenges. Faith communities can help to de-stigmatise these issues by recognising that parents' own mental health is critical in their being able to nurture and support their children. All kinds of organisations, national and local,

need to play a part in supporting families, show compassion and encourage early intervention.¹⁰⁸

A clear view was expressed that the Church of England should be engaging with families more actively, helping parents to develop positive parenting skills and supporting parents' own mental health. Faith communities can model kindness and support, come alongside parents who are struggling and lead by example.

We also found strong support for faith communities to demonstrate their conviction that every child matters and deserves a loving, stable home:

'Children need to know that they are loved unconditionally and that that love is not based on what they achieve or their skills or how they look etc. It is just because they are them. They need to have a family (whatever that looks like).'

Churches need to ensure that their doors are open for all families and their children, and that they understand the issues they may be experiencing:

'We have a responsibility not only for children born to our family but to those in society who have not found a safe haven. 'It takes a village to raise a child'. It is our Christian duty to offer all children respect, listen to their voices, protect them where possible.'

While there are undoubtedly many difficult challenges, we believe that ambitious visions can be taken forward, and that there are good reasons to be hopeful if government, local agencies and faith communities work together to shape a better future in which every child and every parent matters.

Key Messages from the Commission

In this chapter we focused on the vital importance of every child having the best possible start in life, and parents and families being given support at all stages from pre-birth through childhood and the teenage years. The aim must be to enable children to live with their biological parents wherever possible and when this is too difficult, to be given the most loving home possible. God requires all of us, irrespective of class, ethnicity, education or belief, to create a world which is fit for children to grow and flourish.

1. Every child matters and deserves the very best start in life.
2. Parenting is demanding and parents need support at different stages in their journey as parents: faith communities can and should support parents with their task.
3. Families provide a protective effect: emotional connection, love and joy; shared experiences of family life; strong positive and enduring relationships; and the ability to depend on one another for practical and emotional support. A number of factors inhibit this protective effect, and adequate support is needed to ameliorate them.
4. Young carers are especially vulnerable and attempt to hide their caring role, requiring everyone to be vigilant.
5. The children's social care system is in need of radical reform.
6. The Church of England, other churches and faith communities can provide support for families and for children, irrespective of family structure and parenting arrangements, which is non-stigmatising and non-judgemental.

¹⁰⁵ Walker, J., Selous A., and Misca, G., (2020) *Living in our Shoes: understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces Families*. Ministry of Defence

¹⁰⁶ Call for Evidence Briefing Fourteen *Learning from Christian and other faith traditions about how couples, parents and children can be supported to flourish* Briefing Papers | The Church of England

¹⁰⁷ Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Seven *Children and Young People: promoting mental health and wellbeing, and protection from harm*. Briefing Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

¹⁰⁸ See Kandiah, op.cit

Recommendations

The Commission urges the Church of England:

Through the National Church

To:

- Share awareness across the church of the needs of all new parents, including adoptive parents, and ensure that care and support is offered in a non-judgemental way.
- Advocate for children and young people in the care system, supporting them to find genuine permanency solutions, to the age of 18, and relational and accommodation support for young people leaving care.

This could be done by seeking external funding for a time-limited project for relational and accommodation support for young people leaving care.

- Advocate for young people whose custodial sentences have ended to find genuine permanency solutions.
- Work with government and organisations supporting children and parents to use family-friendly language.

Through its dioceses

To:

- Explore ways to provide loving, caring and non-judgmental support for mothers, fathers and carers to combat adverse childhood experiences.

Through its parishes and deaneries

To:

- Encourage and support current and prospective kinship carers, foster and adoptive parents, and honour, celebrate and offer practical support to those who are caring for children and young people.

This could begin through a national online campaign through the Church of England's digital presence.

- Consider ways to offer accessible and affordable activities for young people within their community, in partnership with local organisations, local authorities and other faith communities.

- Be especially vigilant in respect of young carers in each community and find ways to support and walk alongside them and their families.
- Provide parenting support through: quality parenting courses, for all stages of childhood, including in partnership with schools; the provision of high-quality toddler groups and similar activities. This should be based on existing good practice and funded through bids for mission funding as this is an essential element of the Church's mission.
- Take the opportunity when infants and children are brought in for baptism to encourage good parenting, and to support parental relationships, and to consider promoting *The Parents Promise*.

The Commission urges the Government to:

- Develop a clear cross-government strategy to end child poverty.
- Ensure that all prospective parents, including adoptive parents and guardians, have access to and receive comprehensive information about the support available from professionals working with new parents.
- Portray adoption as a way for children to find the family they need in order to enjoy the security and stability of a loving home in which their wellbeing and happiness is the paramount consideration.
- Implement at pace all of the recommendations of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.
- Encourage the imaginative development of different forms of relational and accommodation support for young people leaving care, ensuring that every young person leaving care should have consistent, loving relationships to help them flourish.
- Encourage the imaginative development of different forms of relational and accommodation support for children and young people leaving custodial sentences.
- Ensure that children and young people are protected as far as possible from harmful material online, in conjunction with supporting parents and carers, and to ensure that children and young people are able to navigate social media confidently and appropriately.

7. LEARNING AND LISTENING

*'We are born through relationship and spend our lives negotiating multiple relationships'*¹

While exploring the challenges facing parents and carers in nurturing and caring for their children, our attention increasingly focused on children and young people themselves and how they learn about relationships. During our discussions with children and young people, the Commission considered the role of families, schools and faith communities in preparing them for a world in which healthy, loving relationships will be central to their wellbeing. Christian theology teaches us that:

'Human identity as imago Dei is not characterised only by our individuality and uniqueness. It is also evident in our relationality. We are communal, persons-in-relationship.'²

We therefore asked two key questions:

1. How do we enable children and young people to build relational capability and learn about the kinds of relationships that will enable them to flourish?
2. How do we ensure that we hear the voices of children and young people and understand their wishes, feelings and concerns so that they can contribute to their own agency?

Relationships are vital for children throughout their lives. Babies begin to relate as they develop in the womb, and then from birth. They relate to mother and father, siblings, and to increasing numbers of people around them as they grow. In playgroup, nursery, in faith communities, and at school, children relate to a

variety of other children across social, cultural, ethnic and faith boundaries. Everyday life, and childhood in particular, is a diverse relational learning environment, shaping individual identity. Much of biblical teaching highlights the special needs of children without close relationships – referred to as 'orphans' – and the responsibility of communities to provide relational care. All children are seen as vulnerable and trusting, and Jesus himself warned strongly about the perils of harming children.³

Christian teaching puts emphasis on starting children off on the right path in life, respecting their vulnerability and enabling them to put their trust in the adults around them. For the majority of children, guidance on that path begins with parents who hold the key to modelling loving relationships. Parents are most likely to create an environment that fosters children's social development, displaying warmth, empathy, and sensitiveness.⁴ One obvious way to build relational capability in children, therefore, is to strengthen parents' ability to nurture and to foster a strong relationship with each other so that children learn by experiencing stable, loving relationships in the home. Children also develop relational capability through their interactions in the community, in school and in places of worship, as well as online and through various media formats such as television, games, and social media.

Learning about relationships

'The sensitive upbringing of children and the task of education are integral issues to a theology of childhood.'⁵

One of the most significant learning environments is the school setting and, increasingly, programmes that enhance children's understanding of loving relationships and social capability have been embedded into the school curriculum. The strongest message and a key recommendation to emerge from a study of adult relationships⁶ was that learning about relationships should begin as early as possible in a child's life. Young children can be encouraged to be kind and caring and to share their toys, for example. With increasing numbers of parents choosing to have only one child, the relationship learning that happened through siblings has diminished significantly. Thus the importance of parents enabling their child(ren) to meet and relate with others from a young age is increased. As they grow, children can be helped to talk about friendships and how they are feeling, and can learn positive ways to sort out squabbles. This learning can help them to develop skills and behaviours which prepare them for forming loving relationships, and set them onto a positive path into adulthood:

'When we're born, we have most of the brain cells we'll ever need but our brains don't fully develop until our late twenties. From birth to around four, the 'hardwiring' is put in place. A baby's brain can double in size that first year alone. By the time we're three, it can be 80 percent the size of the adult brain. So what is growing? It's the connection between the neurons. And what makes connections? Relationships.'⁷

In September 2020, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) was put on a statutory footing

¹ Storkey, (2022) op.cit.

² ibid

³ Gospel of Matthew, ch 18 v 6

⁴ Katz, I., Corlyon, J., La Placa, V., and Hunter, S., (2007) *The relationship between parenting and poverty*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

⁵ Storkey, op.cit

⁶ Walker et al (2010) op.cit.

⁷ Ashton-Shaw, K., (2019) *Why relationships education matters; Parentkind, bringing together home and school*. https://www.parentkind.org.uk/about-us/news-and-blogs/blog/why-relationships-education-matters?utm_source=parentkind.org.uk&utm_medium=301#

alongside Health Education, requiring teaching about relationships to take place in primary schools and RSE to be taught in secondary schools in England. Independent schools continue to provide RSE according to the Government's Independent School Standards Regulations:

'By supporting children to develop positive relationship skills, they learn to make friends, manage conflict, understand people, increase empathy and, as a result, decrease bullying.'⁸

Although the curriculum can be personalised by each school to fit their specific community and its context, children of primary and secondary school age should receive a comprehensive understanding of different types of relationship, including friendships, family relationships, dealing with strangers and, predominantly at secondary school, an understanding about healthy intimate couple relationships.⁹ The teaching is designed to foster wellbeing and resilience. Schools should take the religious affiliation of pupils into account and teach RHSE from a faith perspective as appropriate.¹⁰ Relationship education must be of the highest quality. However, it is the ethos and culture of the school and how it builds and handles relationships every day in the life of the school that will contribute most to every child's learning.

In primary schools, children should learn the basic building blocks of healthy, respectful relationships, focusing on family and friendship. At secondary school pupils should understand the link between relationships and health, about intimate relationships and sex, and the risks

associated with drugs and alcohol. Young people need to:

'understand how their relationships may affect their health, including mental health, and wellbeing. Factual knowledge about sex, sexual health and sexuality is to be taught within wider teaching about relationships, giving young people the skills to navigate their relationships as they move through life.'¹¹

The overall aim should be to enable every child to make wise and healthy choices about their relationships as they grow and develop their interpersonal skills. Importantly, children and young people should learn about caring and respectful relationships, including the unacceptability of bullying, about being safe online and in person and, as adolescents, about giving consent for sexual activities.

The Commission welcomes the focus on helping children and young people to develop personal attributes such as kindness, integrity, generosity and honesty.¹² We would urge that children and young people should also learn about love and its centrality in our lives, and the importance of strong and stable relationships, including in marriage, for our health and wellbeing. There is considerable concern that young people do not always recognise the importance of both parents being involved in the upbringing of children. Young men and women need to be helped to understand they each have an important role in parenting a child that they fathered or carried.

We believe that it is also important to include discussion in relationship education about the importance of people who remain single, whether by choice or circumstance, forming

loving relationships.

We are aware that there are ongoing discussions about the appropriateness of teaching about LGBTQI+ relationships, gender dysphoria and female genital mutilation. We noted the widespread agreement recognising the shocking nature of female genital mutilation as the brutal violation of a girl's or woman's body. We support the work seeking to educate young people on this, and note the advice given to schools.¹³ Not teaching about these issues isolates the young people for whom this is part of their life experience.¹⁴ We would urge that the focus must always be on instilling the importance of love and care in all relationships, and the need to fully understand the implications of different activities and decisions taken at a young age.

Commission members have spoken to a wide range of young people about their experience of relationship education. Some young people reported that the teaching had been helpful, while others were sceptical about whether they had learned very much to assist them in their life. Children and young people are increasingly sophisticated in their use of technology and accessing material online, such that adults may not always keep up with the advances. It is critically important that their learning addresses the topics that they can read about, that they understand the different ways in which relationships can be abusive and coercive, and know how to say 'no' to those relationships.

While relationship and sex education as a formal process is very important and needs to be offered at a high level of quality and consistency,

the bigger lessons on relationships are learned from the ethos and culture of the school. It is as pupils observe staff relating to one another, and as they experience how staff relate to them as equal human beings, that they learn most about relationships. The ethos and culture of the school in promoting healthy, caring, kind relationships between pupils in all aspects of school life teaches far more than any structured programme.

The research evidence demonstrates that the building blocks of relational capability are laid down in childhood. These building blocks comprise early home and care-giving experiences, social and environmental influences and an individual's personality traits.¹⁵ Relational competence/intelligence continues to develop over the life-course, shaped by the various experiences an individual has alongside relationships with others.¹⁶

The Royal Foundation¹⁷ has focused its work on the importance of promoting learning in a child's early years:

'Science tells us that a child's experiences from conception through their first five years will go on to shape their next 50. It tells us that the kind of children we raise today, will reflect the kind of world we will live in tomorrow. It tells us that investing in the start of life is not an indulgence, but economically, socially and psychologically vital to a prosperous society.'

⁸ ibid

⁹ Gregory-Witham, E., (2021) Relationships and Sex Education – what is it and why does it matter to the Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households? News | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

¹⁰ DfE (2020), Relationship education requirements

¹¹ Gregory-Witham op.cit

¹² DfE guidelines op.cit.

¹³ <http://nationalfgmcentre.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/06/FGM-Schools-Guidance-National-FGM-Centre>

¹⁴ See: *Valuing All God's Children: Guidance for Church of England schools on challenging homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying* (2019)

¹⁵ Mansfield and Reynolds op.cit.

¹⁶ Hansson, R., Daleiden, E., and Hayslip, B., (2004) *Relational Competence across the life span*. In R. Lang and K Fingerma (eds) *Growing Together: personal relationships across the life span*, Cambridge University Press

¹⁷ The Royal Foundation (2022) *State of the Nation: Understanding Public Attitudes to the Early Years Executive Summary* p4 Ipsos Mori

Pornography

The consumption of pornographic material is becoming increasingly normalised in popular culture and also becoming more public, with people watching pornography on their phones or laptops while travelling on public transport, for example. The normalisation of pornography in popular culture inevitably influences expectations about what sexual activities are appropriate and what sexual relationships are like. Pornography creates narratives and images which those viewing it can regard as 'normal'. This can be especially worrying when children are groomed and coerced into filming themselves engaging in sexual acts which are subsequently posted on pornographic websites. The NSPCC¹⁸ has reported that a third of ten-year-old children have looked at pornography. Moreover, racism and sexism are both implicit and explicit in a large amount of pornographic material.

Ongoing vigilance in regards to the safety of the online world is essential. The Commission welcomes those aspects of the Online Safety Bill which seek to provide a higher level of protection for children. Our conversations with *The Naked Truth Project* revealed some extremely alarming stories about how pornographic material is being accessed and the damage it is doing to young people and to adults. *The Naked Truth Project*,¹⁹ established in 2013 in Manchester and rooted in and inspired by the Christian faith, set out to open eyes and free lives from the damaging impact of pornography through awareness, education and recovery programmes, believing that schools and colleges have a key role to play in appropriate teaching.

People look at pornography for many reasons including life/relationship dissatisfaction or

boredom (scrolling as if it were any part of the internet) and it is often minimised as a non-issue by those doing it. Young people often come across it by chance and then find themselves unable to resist it. Often it is a change in personal situation which causes people to get in touch with the *Naked Truth Project* – for example, fathers who realise when they are accessing pornography that they are looking at young girls the same age as their daughters, or a partner who uncovers a hidden habit. We were told that there is not enough support for partners who often go to peer-led groups but do not necessarily want to share information about their partner. There is still a fear of the stigma and feelings of shame among everyone involved.

A survey²⁰ in 2022 of 2000 people by *Naked Truth* found that

- 34% thought pornography was an acceptable part of modern society
- 38% watched at least once a week
- 13% said they were 'addicted'
- 49% said it had a negative impact on their mental health

The Commission was told that 24 per cent of delegates at a Church Leader Conference had viewed porn in the past month.²¹ *Naked Truth* have released a new resource for churches as a result of finding that 93 per cent of pastors say pornography is a bigger issue than ever before in their congregations, but only 7 per cent of their churches have a programme to address it. Churches join as members and have access to training for small group leaders and access to the team for direct support.

¹⁸ NSPCC Time to Act

¹⁹ <https://nakedtruthproject.com/porn-whats-the-big-deal/>

²⁰ *Naked Truth /Savanta ComRes(2022)* <https://www.nakedtruth.training/church-membership>

²¹ *Naked Truth op.cit.*

The Naked Truth Project

Now based in the UK, the US, Europe and New Zealand, the Project's educators, counsellors and creatives inspire conversations with young people about the harmful impact of pornography, while specialist counsellors provide practical support to users. The Schools' Lead for the *Naked Truth project*, Natasha Rees, told the Commission that unrealistic and violent depictions of sex – 88 per cent of porn scenes contain physical aggression - can create a myriad of insecurities and warped expectations about sexual encounters, and result in increasing levels of sexual harassment in schools.

The team are equally passionate about prevention and restoration: upstream, educating about the harms of porn and warning people of the dangers ahead; and downstream, pulling people out of the deep waters of 'addiction', betrayal trauma and much more. Many of the team have their own stories and have seen first-hand the destruction that porn can cause in people's lives. In today's culture, pornography has become so normalised that many do not realise the damage it is doing until it feels too late. *The Naked Truth Project* supports those who feel they cannot stop engaging with pornography, whether visual, audio, or written. Their clients have often tried to stop but failed, frequently relying on a change in situation to be the catalyst for change in their habits.

The Naked Truth aims to educate young people about the harmful impact of pornography and empower them to make healthy choices. We were told:

'This is a cultural issue; it's about attitudes and behaviours becoming normalised, and schools and colleges can't solve that by themselves- the government needs to look at the ease with which children can access pornography- but schools and colleges have a key role to play. They can maintain the right culture in their corridors, and they can provide relationship, sex, and health education that reflects reality and equips young people with the information they need.'

The majority of *The Naked Truth* programmes have no religious content, but the organisation is rooted in and inspired by the Christian faith. Pornography is described as being the junk food of a healthy and fulfilling sex life, which is not conducive to healthy flourishing.

The Naked Truth Project shared a number of moving and unsettling personal testimonies.²² These indicate very clearly how young teenagers become hooked on viewing pornography:

'I experienced my first exposure to porn when I was 11. It began with an innocent interest in movie scenes which involved kissing and people at various stages of undress. I would go and re-watch scenes of scantily clad women on YouTube. I advanced to more and more graphic stuff, and when I was 12 I found a mobile app that you could watch 18-rated movies on and I would regularly watch the sex scenes over and over again.'

²² These can be found on the Commission website.

When I was 13, I discovered hard-core online porn for the first time ... It was so easy I couldn't believe I had never discovered this before. I was instantly hooked and went back to it the next day, and the next day, and the day after that. It very quickly consumed me and over the following 2 years not a day went by in which I didn't watch porn at least once ... I gave up sleep and stopped looking after myself in order to watch more and more porn ... My desire led me to some pretty unpleasant stuff. The further I went the more degrading and perverted the sexual acts became. The women in the videos went from being slapped, to being tied up, strangled and virtually raped by a line of guys. But I honestly didn't care what I was watching as long as I could receive the satisfaction I was after. Every day I would literally consume hundreds of pictures and videos, all of it slowly affecting me in the worst ways.'

Other testimonies show how this habit as a teenager was taken forward in adult life and also into marriage, almost destroying a committed relationship when the truth was exposed.

If children and young people are to develop healthy relationships and build relational capability and emotional intelligence, it is essential that they learn about the harmful impacts of pornography and sexual behaviours that are not grounded in love, respect and mutual trust. We believe that the easy access to pornographic material is very worrying and support for children and teenagers who find themselves caught up in a spiral of increasing 'addiction' is essential, as is support for parents, carers, and partners who are unsure how to help their loved ones.

The Royal Foundation²³ has recognised that parents cannot do everything on their own and learning about loving relationships requires input from all those who have contact with children from an early age. This argues for collaboration between home, school and the community.

Home, school and community

'Make sure children and young people have equal access to education and support to enjoy healthy extracurricular activities.'²⁴

Teachers and organisations working with children and young people told the Commission that schools alone cannot prepare young people for healthy relationships and teach them how to avoid harmful relationships. If it takes a village to raise a child then there needs to be a strong partnership between home, school and the community. While schools can empower children, build their resources and develop their skills and knowledge, it is families and parents who need to be supported to reinforce the messages. Parents must take responsibility for encouraging their children and ensure that they are able to form and pursue healthy relationships, as they are the primary people from whom children learn about relationships.

²³ The Royal Foundation.op.cit.

²⁴ Call for Evidence Briefing Fourteen

²⁵ Ibid.

Responses to our Call for Evidence emphasised the ways in which values can be modelled, taught and learned at home, at school and in the community:

'Faithfulness and trust and exclusivity are all values that can help relationships to thrive.'²⁵

Children and young people need to learn about:

'Key supportive and empowering values: Respect, equality, support, inclusion, love, compassion.'

'Proactively equipping people with essential relationship habits as a key part of personal and professional development across society must become a strategic priority to help address the costs and challenges of relationship breakdown and create a healthier society.'

Since the National Society for the Promotion of Education was founded in 1811, the Church of England has had a long and respected history of involvement in education: currently around one million children attend the 4,632 Church of England schools in England. Moreover, about 15 million people alive today went to a Church of England school. In addition, the origins of the Sunday School Movement can be traced to the mid to late eighteenth century when St. Mary's Parish Church in Nottingham pioneered Sunday

School education for children who were unable to attend a day school due to poverty and long working hours.²⁶ The main motivation was to 'civilise street children', teach them to read and learn the catechism - 'enforcing decorum' among a 'set of little heathens':²⁷

'Thus, the Sunday School at its zenith provided a means of improving and saving millions of lives as well as a route out of impoverished conditions, thanks to numerous Christian philanthropists.'²⁸

Nevertheless, history indicates that the majority of children did not stay connected to the church once they had learned to read, and attendance declined over the twentieth century, although a poll in 1970 found that 61 per cent of parents still encouraged their children to attend.²⁹ In her history of the Sunday School movement prepared for the Commission, Irene Smale pointed out that the continuation of religion from childhood depends on the successful transmission of faith from one generation to the next, and the home, church, and day school have been the three principal socialisation agencies. The provision of Sunday Schools as a regular feature of church life, has progressively faded out as the church has looked for other ways of engaging with children and young people, through Messy Church, for example.

²⁶ Smale, I., (2022) *The Evolution of the Sunday School 1751 to the Present Day As a Paradigm for the Church in Supporting Societal Crises*. Supporting Paper I www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

²⁷ Cliff, Philip. (1986) *The Rise and Development of the Sunday School Movement in England 1780 - 1980 National Christian Education Council* p. 3.

²⁸ Smale, op.cit

²⁹ Field, Clive D. (2017) *Secularization in the Long 1960s: Numerating Religion in Britain*. Oxford University Press

Messy Church

Messy Church began some 19 years ago, and offers a church for families and others who are not already part of a church. With five core values: Christ-centred, hospitality, celebration, creativity and intergenerational, Messy Church aims to be a church which focuses on the needs of families and others. Messy Church offers a positive context for developing young leaders, and supporting the needs of different generations. One of the aspects of play is the sheer joy of having fun.

Messy Church shows a passion for making activities accessible to families, and especially for parents whose children have additional needs, and are used to having to fight for the support they and their children need. Messy Church offers a place of belonging and we heard about people of different ages who had found a sense of belonging in Messy Church: a young man not living with his family who had joined the team, a woman in her 90s who was not very mobile but loved being in Messy Church and engaging with others, a family with a disabled child who had found their own church inaccessible, a mother who was an alcoholic who reached out for help and someone to talk to, and a mother of two hyperactive children who are normally asked to leave social settings because of their unruly behaviour. The sense of belonging this young family had discovered at Messy Church had led to the family being baptised.

Importantly, Messy Church provides a safe place to listen and communicate, with volunteers able to communicate non-verbally to everyone who comes: 'I love you, you're worth this.'

The Church of England's vision for Christian education is that it should be educating for wisdom, knowledge and skills; educating for hope and aspiration; educating for community and living well together; and educating for dignity and respect.³⁰ The Mothers' Union recognised that, in their experience, '*children are instinctively spiritual and this needs to be encouraged in the early years*'.³¹ Some of the education is offered by school chaplains who work in all kinds of schools, including in non-church schools, although there is no one single model for school chaplaincy. Chaplains come from different backgrounds, some are

clergy and some are lay people, some teach and others do not, some combine their chaplaincy with another role, for instance leading a local church, as we heard when we visited a number of schools.³²

In addition to supporting the emotional wellbeing of pupils and staff, school chaplains aim to build a bridge between the school and church, and between the school and the wider community, including other denominations and faith communities. The school chaplain might be the main and, often, only contact some pupils have with the Church of England. It is important to note, however, that chaplaincy support is



not universal and there is considerably more chaplaincy involvement in primary than in secondary schools due to the school numbers in each sector. Through chaplaincy there is also an Anglican presence in the vast majority of England's Higher Education Institutions, giving children and young people access to faith-based support throughout their journey to adulthood.

Growing Faith

The recent Church of England's Growing Faith movement³³ seeks to put children, young people and families at the heart of all the mission and ministry of the Church.³⁴ Childhood is a vital time for growing faith and for developing relationships. Growing Faith promotes a partnership between the three communities of 'Church, School and Household' and offers

important partnerships that can support children, parents and teachers. While the focus is on ministry for children and young people, enabling them to live out a life-long faith, the values that underpin this are key values for the development of healthy, loving relationships, including living well together, offering dignity and respect in relationships.

Growing Faith places:

'a clear focus on churches serving the life of schools and all Church of England schools committed to working in partnership with churches, building meaningful long-lasting relationships with children and young people which help them navigate the transitions from pre-school to primary, primary to secondary and secondary into further and higher education or employment.'³⁵

³⁰ The Church of England: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/education-and-schools/vision-education>

³¹ Mothers' Union in conversation with the Commission

³² *ibid*

³³ The Growing Faith Foundation / The Church of England: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/education-and-schools/growing-faith-foundation>

³⁴ See: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/renewal-reform/growing-faith>

³⁵ <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-01/GS%202121.pdf>

The Growing Faith Foundation seeks to benefit children and young people by helping them create the world they want to live in, specifically through the lens of the Christian faith. Every Diocese has appointed one or more Growing Faith Champions to take forward the Growing Faith mission locally.

The Commission believes that the partnership between church, school and home can play a leading and vitally important role in enabling children and young people to learn about relationships. It will also prepare them for a future in which healthy, stable and loving relationships can be fostered in childhood, adolescence and throughout life, and help them to recognise, understand and reject abusive and harmful relationships.

One of the central tenets of Growing Faith is for children to be heard, feeling that they are being included, and sharing their stories. The Commission visited the Gosport and Fareham Multi-Academy Trust to learn about the way in which it seeks to transform and enrich the lives of young people and the diverse communities in which they live, thereby being a catalyst for raising ambitions, expectations and aspirations to improve the potential of every pupil. The GFMA Community Hub comprises schools, churches, faith organisations, charities, businesses, social enterprises, and the Royal Navy, in a mission to combat historic social and economic injustice and promote kindness and care.

Successive year groups of pupils joined us to talk about their experiences and ambitions. We heard from a number of very inspiring young people who talked openly about sensitive and

difficult issues such as bullying and difficult home circumstances. Teachers told us about the ways in which they create comfortable safe spaces for children experiencing personal issues, including for pupils who were struggling to return to school after the pandemic, and for young people who are in need of support with their sexuality and identity.

We met with the school pastors who 'walk alongside' young people when they are worried or stressed, modelling kind, caring relationships while listening to children and strengthening the link between church, school, home and community. Gosport School Pastors told us that they are Christian volunteers from local churches under the umbrella of 'Ascension Trust', and have been working in Gosport schools since 2014. They listen, care and provide practical help on a non-judgemental basis to anyone and everyone they meet in the school community. They share the Gospel and show love through their actions, though they are always ready to share their faith if invited to do so. They help and support anyone without discrimination on grounds of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, religion, political persuasion or any other reason. The pastors told us about a number of situations in which they have been able to support pupils over the years:

'For School Pastors it's the relationships we have built with students and staff that mean the most and often it's the simple act of lending a helping hand that starts that relationship.'³⁶

³⁶ ibid

The Gosport & Fareham Multi Academy Trust

The Gosport and Fareham Multi Academy Trust (GFM)³⁷ is an educational Trust of five schools: two Secondary schools, two Junior Schools and a Special School for Boys. The purpose of the GFM is to enable a 'local solution' for Gosport; it is a solution which is about solving the specific local challenges through the combined strength of the education provision working collaboratively with local partners and agencies. Through the cohesive capability, bandwidth, influence and impact a MAT structure exemplifies, the model will be the example where collective endeavour trumps individual schools and organisations working independently.

The 'Gosport Project' tackles specific and contextual issues such as achievement gaps, inequities in life expectancy, and life-chances economically. The GFM becomes the conduit to not just helping young people academically and prepare them for life and work, but to help build further the communities around them as part of the sustainable solution. Fundamental to the GFM purpose is positioning young people in a pride-driven mission to build a better community. Children are enabled to co-design the initiatives that solve local problems, enabling the community to re-energise itself for the future. The GFM exists to extend the design of schooling beyond the classroom into the local community. It cares about being more than an educational organisation with a social intent, dedicated to improving the lives of all it connects with. The focus of the education is therefore specific to the needs of the local area and its particular context

At the core of the purpose is achievement in the widest possible sense of education, which is education for life. It is about instilling aspiration for all, enabling and empowering pupils to achieve beyond their own expectations and be the best version of themselves they can be. In doing this, the GFM develops world class approaches to learning through the use of technology and teaching models; the design of 'schooling' is learner centric and the culture of the organisation is steeped in an enthusiasm for generating knowledge by those who are seeking to understand the problems they face and find solutions to overcome them.

'The GFM Purpose is to transform and enrich the lives of young people and the communities they live in. Through the power of education, leadership, lifelong learning and social equality. We will be a catalyst for raising ambitions, expectations and aspirations to collectively improve the potential of all those we connect with ... The GFM Way consists of a set of principles for all members of our community. The GFM Way forms a key part of our DNA and has been built around GFM values. It will help to guide a wide variety of situations whilst communicating high standards and expectations in everything we do.'³⁸

The values are: to try, help, engage, grow, focus, motivate, work, achieve, and yearn. In order to tackle the root causes of disadvantage and social inequality GFM seeks to ensure

³⁷ See: Willis, C., (2023) The Gosport and Fareham Multi Academy Trust. Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

³⁸ Chris Willis, Executive Headteacher, GFMA

that school improvement and community development go hand in hand. Community transformation is only possible through partnerships and collaboration and where these are nurtured and secured, significant success and improvement can be achieved. An example of this is through the strong partnership with the Royal Navy Royal Marines Charity which has enabled significant investment into the Gosport Community through its support of establishing the Gosport Community Hub on one of the school sites. This significant work has led to an approach in our community of combining education, pastoral care and the work of key community stakeholders, including our Gosport School Pastors and local church partnerships.

We know that children who are encouraged to build the foundations for forming effective relationships in their early years will continue to develop their relational skills. Socially competent children tend to do better in school since they know how to get on well with others and form friendships, to cooperate with their peers and listen to each other. The relationships between pupils and teachers are important for enhancing positive educational outcomes.

During the Commission visit to Birmingham, we spent time at the Springfield Project in a community in Sparkhill where the main demographic is of Pakistani descent and the overwhelming majority of residents are Muslim. The initiative began in 1988 when a group of women at St Christopher's Church had a vision based on Jesus' story of a tiny mustard seed that grew into a beautiful tree. In a building attached to a local church, paid staff and volunteers provide nursery activities for very young children from a range of backgrounds who speak a variety of languages, and support parents and

families who may need additional support. This creative, child-friendly initiative is a best practice example of church and community working closely together to meet the needs of a diverse population, model inclusion and healthy relationships.

During our Commission visits around the country, we observed some inspiring ways in which children are supported and encouraged to develop their personal relationship skills in school. We believe that empowering young people to learn the value and skills of mentoring and coaching within their school would, hopefully, lead to some young people going on to develop careers as mentors, coaches and therapists.

The Diocese of Oxford's contemplative tool kit for schools was developed as a response to acute mental health needs in young people. *Space Makers* introduces contemplative practices which can benefit wellbeing, flourishing and mental health.

The Springfield Project: God's love in our community

Springfield runs a programme of community activities which aim to empower, enable and enrich the lives of local children, young people and families. These activities include nurseries, holiday clubs, as well as different professional services such as health visitors and midwives. The Project is linked to St Christopher's Church, both through a connecting door, and through financial and practical support.

In 2009 the Springfield Project hosted a new interfaith youth charity known as 'The Feast', and by 2013, a local allotment project started to deliver community gardens and a forest school. In 2014, the Opening Doors programme began to offer Work Club and English classes, and in 2015 a Neighbourhood Scheme was launched with local GPs to provide health and wellbeing activities such as walking, gardening clubs, crafts and games, and new volunteering opportunities. By 2016, Springfield was employing 50 staff with 93 volunteers, helping over 8,000 individuals a year from families with young children, to young people and adults.

Springfield is perceived locally as a place where people can seek help and be referred to services. The vision is to show God's love in their local community; and the mission is to help others to live life to the full. The project retains its Christian identity through its values which reflect the love and compassion of Jesus: welcoming and inclusive; listening; serving; professional; and growing.

Commission Members had the opportunity to meet three mothers who had used Springfield's services at various times, and spoke about how the support they received had increased their confidence, self-esteem and wellbeing:

'I usually stay at home or just do a bit of shopping. Now I look forward to coming here because I've made new friends and it lifts my mood.'

Space Makers

During one of our early meetings, Commission Members met with staff members in the Diocese of Oxford who have produced 'Space Makers', which was developed as a response to acute mental health challenges facing young people. 'Space Makers' is a contemplative practices toolkit which helps schools to embrace some of the ancient wisdom of Ignatian Spirituality and the Christian tradition and, in the process, assist children to navigate the world around them. A family edition of 'Space Makers' will be published in due course.

Participants are invited to join in the following practices:

- Stilling: remembering that we are human beings not human doings
- Noticing: recognising small details of life as signposts to personal and spiritual truths
- Dwelling: how to make the Bible 'come alive' as you read it
- Mending: touching on some of the more difficult aspects of life
- Filling: opening up to the flow of God's life-bringing Spirit
- Blessing: using the tree of life to consider how we can be blessed and be a blessing to others

Many people who contributed to the Commission's Call for Evidence welcomed the Church of England's initiatives for engaging with children and young people in ways which reflect modern daily life:

'Invest in creating a solid children and youth faith development programme with trained and inspiring youth workers ... use a variety of learning styles and educational technology to engage a very digitally savvy audience.'³⁹

They also pointed to the importance of the Church of England linking with schools and families to encourage conversations which 'talk about the values that all faiths have in common, such as love' and to ensure that young Christians do not feel isolated at school if their friends

do not have a faith. Many people also urged a renewed focus on children and young people having access to activities in the community. They mentioned a variety of clubs and groups including youth clubs, sporting facilities, Scouts, Guides, the Boys and Girls Brigade, the Armed Forces Cadet Services, the Mini Police and Fire Service, amongst others. However, we were also told that some of the local facilities are too expensive for families in more deprived communities and many people urged the Church of England to offer more activities 'that do not cost money'.

Tina Wilson, the Chief Safeguarding Officer for the Scouts, told the Commission that the Scouts are working in 98 of the UK's 100 most deprived areas, but that their waiting lists are long.

Scouts

The Scouts currently has 560,000 members, with 422,000 young people aged 4-18. A third of the movement is female. And there are 90,000 young people on waiting lists. In 2021, Squirrels was launched, working with 4-5 year olds in "Dreys". There are now 16,000 Squirrels across 700 Dreys. The aim is to attract 50,000 young people to scouting and 10,000 volunteers by 2025.

Scouts are delivering their Skills for Life strategy, actively supporting young people in their personal development, empowering them to make a positive contribution to society. Research⁴⁰ has shown that:

- those who belonged to Scouts tended to have better mental health aged 50; were 15% less likely to suffer from anxiety or mood disorders; and less likely to experience life stresses
- programmes like Scouts develop team work/self-resilience which may have life-long benefits, and may build resilience and increase the chances of achievement in life

Scouts promote a culture of openness, transparency and challenge and take their safeguarding responsibilities very seriously.

Listening to children and young people

'Why don't adults listen to me? Adults don't always understand and they don't always get things right.'⁴¹

Talking and listening to children and young people empowers them, builds their resources and develops their skills and knowledge. In 1989 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) set out what every child needs for a safe, happy and fulfilled childhood. Article 12 asserts that:

'every child who is capable of forming a view shall have the right to express those views on all matters affecting the child, and these should be given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity.'

The young people that we spoke to were firm in their views that they want to be heard and to be consulted about decisions which impact on their lives.⁴² Long gone are the days when children should be seen and not heard.

Moreover, the young people who engaged with the Commission were willing and keen to talk openly about sensitive, emotional and difficult issues such as mental health, bullying, racial discrimination, domestic abuse and parental separation. Children and young people often find it easier than adults to discuss these issues. Talking about relationships, sexual behaviour and pornography, for example, is normal in the world inhabited by young people.

Care-experienced young people and those who were familiar with the family justice system gave moving and sometimes harrowing

³⁹ Call for Evidence Briefing Number Nine

⁴⁰ University of Edinburgh : Life-long study, 10,000 born in the UK in 1958

⁴¹ Young person giving evidence to the Voice of the Child Advisory Group Review (2014) Ministry of Justice

⁴² Hawes, M., (2023) *Hearing from Children and Young People* Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

accounts of what had happened to them. Most of the young people described family life as messy and some were critical of assumptions which are sometimes made, especially in faith communities, that family life should always be 'perfect', and that difficulties should not be spoken about. We heard a loud call for church communities, parents and professionals to listen carefully to young people and their experiences, to involve them more fully in the life of the church, and to participate in programmes that are designed to support parents and families.

The Commission also received many pleas from adults that faith groups should be more open in talking about difficult personal issues, acknowledging the messiness of family life, although some young people were sceptical about the role of churches in helping them to develop healthy relationships. They made it clear that, in their view, church sermons are not a helpful forum to offer teaching about relationships. Talking in safe spaces and small

groups is seen as a positive way forward, particularly as constructive conversations allow perceived discriminatory views to be called out. They also offer young people a forum in which they can express their views, especially about issues which affect them. Young people told us that faith communities can be 'like family', nurturing and loving and offering support throughout school and university.

Young people expect to be heard and understood and have a right in our society to express their views. Mr Justice MacDonald reminds us that:

'children's rights were born of a rapidly changing world of technological revolution, economic and social upheaval, war, conflict and extremism.'⁴³

The child's right to participate fully and directly in the formulation of their own destiny as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is described by MacDonald as a cardinal right that establishes

the status of children as equal members of human society, ensuring participation in accordance with the child's age, development and understanding.

He warns of the danger of well-meaning adults and professionals seeking merely to protect children from the dangers of modern society, such as pornography and online harm, and slipping back into a protective paradigm in which decisions are taken without any participation of the child involved. This warning speaks to the importance of talking with young people about difficult issues, including suicide, pornography and mental health issues. Parents who have lost a child to suicide increasingly campaign for more open communication about such very difficult issues. Parents and children need support in being able to share worries and concerns. Faith communities should be able to provide safe spaces in which to open up these conversations.

Hearing children's voices in the Family Justice System

Listening to children and young people is especially important for all children who are the subject of public and/or private family law proceedings. When parents are unable to look after their child and the care system takes responsibility for their wellbeing, and when parents separate or divorce and decisions have to be made about where a child should live and how both parents will continue to share the care of the child, listening to children's voices is essential. Successive government reports⁴⁴ have stressed the importance of – and made strong recommendations – about hearing children's voices, but we understand that this does not always happen. The messages from children and

young people are consistent:

'Listen and genuinely hear us, because it has real life impact. Trust that we know what we want even if we are young.'⁴⁵

A recent collection of personal testimonies written by young people in the Family Justice system⁴⁶ offers a unique learning opportunity for everyone who works with and walks alongside children and young people experiencing difficult family circumstances. The Commission has been concerned about the potential negative impacts of family breakdown on young people as well as on parents. Listening to children and young people should encourage better understanding of these impacts from a child's point of view alongside reflections on the need for support and interventions that protect the integrity of family relationships that are so critical to children's wellbeing.

The Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) has published several detailed guides for parents and professionals, and asks us all to be 'our best selves' and 'show we care' when we talk with children and young people. The partnership between home, school and church can be usefully strengthened if all those involved reinforce a number of key messages about how to support children and young people whose lives can be turned upside down by parental separation or parents' inability to cope.

Our own conversations with members of the FJYPB re-enforced the published messages, all of which we endorse. We heard the following important messages from young people, aimed at families and parents who are separated, schools, the Family Justice System, communities and faith groups:

- 'Remember it is okay for me to love and have a relationship with both my parents'

⁴³ MacDonald op.cit p292

⁴⁴ Walker, J., and Lake-Carroll, A., (2015) *Final Report of the Voice of the Child Dispute Resolution Advisory Group*, Ministry of Justice

⁴⁵ FJYPB (2022) *In Our Shoes: Experiences of children and young people in the Family Justice System*, Cafcass p34

⁴⁶ ibid



even if they are separated'

- 'When making decisions about my life, think about how I feel and how I might feel in future: talk to me and keep me informed'
- 'Be flexible, open to change, and willing to compromise as I grow up'

Despite the repeated calls from the FJYPB for adults and professionals to listen to the views of children and young people, a recent review of international research on children's experiences of parental separation and court proceedings concluded that many children continue to feel unheard, and that many have a limited understanding of the court process, the role of lawyers and judges, and their right to be heard.⁴⁷ Going to court can be daunting, but with the appropriate support many children who want to do so can find that this experience gives them much-needed agency in their own lives. There is an important distinction to be drawn between children wanting their views to be listened to and taken seriously and children wanting responsibility for making decisions which is not what they are asking for. Roe has suggested that:

'Support can make a difference for children and we need to think about how to improve support in the community, including from schools, for children.'⁴⁸

This being so, there is a need for communities, churches and schools to understand better children's views and experiences and to consider how together they might reduce the distress, trauma and confusion that children and young people experience if they are not given appropriate information or an opportunity to have their concerns and worries heard. This includes hearing the concerns and anxieties of

children impacted by domestic abuse. The FJYPB National Charter for supporting young people affected by domestic abuse requires all of us to:

- Always listen to and act on a child's worries
- Recognise the extraordinary amount of bravery when a child discloses information about domestic abuse
- Build trusting relationships so that children feel safe talking about difficult and painful matters

We note that in the year ending March 2021, there was an upward trend in girls and in children aged 10-14 self-harming, indicating a need to be alert to children and young people who might be doing this and are unable to talk about their worries.

We became aware of the long waiting lists within the Family Justice system for decisions to be made about arrangements for children. Some children can be involved in proceedings for up to five or more years. We heard about one young person whose parents began divorce proceedings when she was aged three and came to an end only when she was 13. The President of the Family Division has indicated his concern about the delays and prolonged proceedings in family justice and the damage that these cause for children and young people.

The Commission heard from a number of young people who had found the delays in the family justice system and the lack of opportunity to be involved in the process very frustrating. The Commission welcomes the establishment of three pilots in early 2023 to open proceedings in public law to trial a more transparent approach. We trust that this approach will allow more young people to be heard, and eventually be extended to include private family law matters.

The Head of Children's Rights and Family Justice at the Department of Education⁴⁹ has argued that the family justice system needs to change and be modernised, and has highlighted the need for closer holistic working to manage down the delays and give greater priority to 'making children matter', and ensuring that support for parents is more consistent. These changes are critical in light of the rising number of applications concerning adolescents entering the family justice system. Public law applications involving 15-17 year-olds doubled between 2011 and 2018.⁵⁰ The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory has reported that the profile of children coming into the child protection system has changed.⁵¹ The main concerns recorded on Child in Need assessments for teenagers:

'tend to be emotional abuse, neglect, a young person's own drug misuse, incidents of young people going missing, and their own or their parents' poor mental health.'⁵²

Additionally there has been an increase in teenagers coming into care associated with gangs. The increase in 16 and 17 year olds coming into care is also related to the rise in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, who make up 6 per cent of the care population. Young people who enter care as a teenager are significantly more likely to experience multiple moves. The data indicate that questions should be asked whether teenagers receive the support they need when they encounter the care system. It would seem that a system designed primarily to address the needs of young children is struggling to meet the needs of older children. *The Commission on Young Lives* has called for

a programme that guarantees teenagers are not placed in inappropriate care settings and ensures the recruitment of specialist foster carers for teenagers.⁵³

Understanding the experiences and listening to the views of the teenagers themselves are essential.

Young people and youth justice

While much has been written about why a child-centred approach to family justice matters,⁵⁴ the Commission's concern about youth justice has highlighted the importance of a child-centred approach to understanding the needs of children and young people who get into trouble and are involved in criminal justice. The age of criminal responsibility is set at ten in England and anyone under the age of 14 is referred to as a 'child.' The term 'juvenile' is increasingly seen as unhelpful labelling and anyone aged 14 and over is better referred to as a young person. Young people aged between 15 and 17 made up 82 per cent of the youth justice population in the year ending March 2021.

In the course of our enquiries about children and young people we found anomalies in respect of ages: at the age of ten a child is deemed responsible for criminal activities. Those who argue for a raise in this age point out that studies of neurodiversity show that the brain is not fully developed until the age of 24. Therefore, ten-year olds will not have the emotional intelligence to prevent themselves being exploited by someone older.⁵⁵ Calls to

⁴⁷ Roe, A., (2021), *Children's experience of private law proceedings: six key messages from research*. Spotlight series. Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. <https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/childrens-experience-of-private-law-proceedings-six-key-messages-from-research>

⁴⁸ *ibid* p 2

⁴⁹ Lauren Kocan, DfE, Talk to the FJYPB Conference July, 2022

⁵⁰ Harker, L., (2020) *A focus on adolescents in the Family Justice System*. Family Law vol 50 p268-270

⁵¹ *ibid*

⁵² *ibid* p269

⁵³ Commission on Young Lives *op.cit*

⁵⁴ Walker, J., and Misca, G., (2019) *Hearing the Voices of Children and Young People in Family Justice*. Family Court Review, Vol 57, no 3, p375-386

⁵⁵ Dr Rachel Condrey, (June 2022) *Solving Youth Violence*. House of Commons

increase the age of criminal responsibility are heard throughout the youth justice system. It is significantly higher in other jurisdictions, for example: 12 in Scotland, Netherlands and Canada; 14 in Italy, Germany and Japan; 15 in Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Norway; and 16 in Belgium and Portugal.

In 2021 the numbers of young people involved in the youth justice system had fallen. The Coronavirus pandemic had a significant impact on youth justice, closing the courts and requiring most children to be home-schooled. Moreover, changes to behaviour, including reduced social contact, may have reduced the number and the type of proven offences. However, there have been downward trends in the number of children entering the youth justice system and the number of children in custody, which is welcome news.

Of considerable concern is the disproportionate representation of Black children at all stages of the youth justice system. The statistics demonstrate that Black children are more likely to be stopped and searched than children from other ethnicities, and 80 per cent of all stop and searches result in no further action. Black children are over four times more likely to be arrested than White children. The proportion of children in custody who are Black was up to 29 per cent in 2021 from 18 per cent ten years

earlier.⁵⁶ Overall, the proportions of children from a Black, Asian or Mixed Ethnic background have increased while those from a White background have decreased. Reoffending rates have been consistently higher for Black children over the decade. While more boys than girls have always entered the youth justice system, the numbers have been falling for both over the last decade.

We have taken evidence from two organisations working specifically with children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds and living in socially deprived inner-city areas. Their work is hugely impressive. Power the Fight⁵⁷ and Spark2Life provide intensive support for young people, many of whom spend a lot of time on the streets. The key is to earn the trust of young people who may be deeply suspicious of authority figures, and this process may take a long time and require considerable patience and understanding.

The work is faith-inspired, underpinned by Christian values, and the staff seek to empower young people and to support their families. The work is born out of a strong belief that churches and faith communities can and should be working closely with these young people and their families, in a non-judgemental way, modelling good relationships.

⁵⁶ Youth Justice Board (2022) *Youth Justice Statistics: 2020 to 2021* www.gov.uk

⁵⁷ Power the Fight (2022) Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

Spark2Life

Commission Members had the privilege of visiting Spark2Life, a faith-based but not faith-biased, award-winning charity in Walthamstow, both founded and led by CEO, Dez Brown, a member of the Commission.

Spark2Life's key message is to support young people in navigating life's challenges, they 'share positive & relevant keys 2 prevent harm and promote life' while employing a trauma-informed and person-centred approach.

Spark2Life work within five key areas to support young people; schools; detached; therapeutic casework; training; and within the community. Within these areas, their services include a Stop and Search Advocacy Service, 1:1 mentoring young people both in schools and within the criminal justice system, while also offering AQA accredited volunteering opportunities for members of the community who also believe in their vision.

Their bespoke work spreads across nine boroughs both in and out of London where they partner with communities and professional networks to ensure young people get fair process and reasonable regard especially where systemic injustice is evident.

Spark2Life's vision is simple: the prevention of crime and the protection and advocacy for people of all ages, especially young people and those who disproportionately face injustice in society.

Solving youth violence and tackling gang culture

'Gang culture provides a form of belonging for young people who lack any sense of identity and belonging. Well-trained youth leaders, pastors and counsellors who can provide groups for young people to belong to, giving them a sense of family and of meaning, makes a difference to these issues.'⁵⁸

Violence against the person, drug offences, robbery and offences involving a weapon have all increased over the last decade. In 2019, 24 children aged 17 or under were murdered with a knife or sharp object - the highest number

in over a decade.⁵⁹ In 2021, 30 teenagers were murdered in London, and in 2022 the number was 13. We are aware that children from troubled family backgrounds are more likely to find themselves in the youth justice system. Our discussions with police and other agencies have revealed that of young people involved in youth violence:

- up to 50 per cent have been raised in environments in which there is significant domestic abuse
- 66 per cent are not in full-time education
- 77 per cent of the serious violence is committed by teenagers on teenagers
- the victims of murder are aged between 13 and 19

⁵⁸ Contributor to the Call for Evidence Briefing Eight

⁵⁹ https://benkinsella.org.uk/?gclid=CjwKCAjwj42UBhAAEiwACIhADhcl01tEmemwfM6CGi2XN8cmYuWoz7_2KFDIzUhXCbhGXGk1LZ6bihocUsoQAVD_BwE

- most have experienced identifiable adverse childhood experiences
- school exclusion and truancy are leading indicators of young people at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation

There has been increasing concern about the numbers of young people who are involved in violence, who join gangs, who carry knives, and who get caught up in the criminal justice system. The Children's Society has reported that more children, some as young as six or seven, are involved in carrying drugs as part of county lines activities,⁶⁰ and that phone lines associated with drug deals almost tripled during the coronavirus pandemic.⁶¹ While young people aged 14- 17 are most likely to be targeted by criminal groups, primary school children are seen as easy targets because they are less likely to get caught. The grooming might start with children being asked to 'keep watch' but it can soon escalate to requiring them to stash weapons, money, or become drug couriers.⁶²

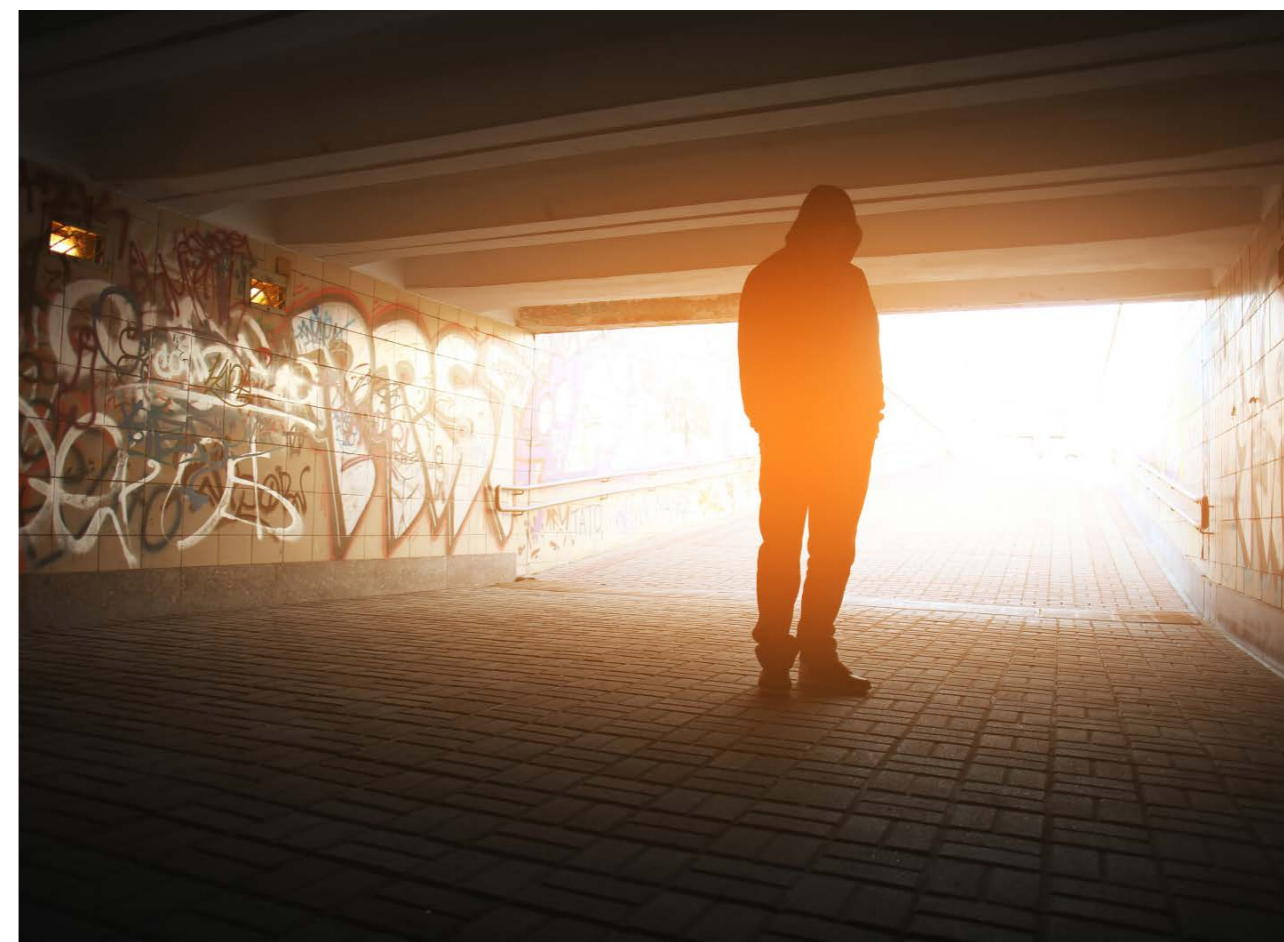
While children from any community can be groomed into county lines, those from poor households, those who regularly skip school or have problems at home, and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children may be more at risk. They may be initiated into gangs by being offered inducements, making it more difficult to walk away. Gang culture tends to take place underground, not publicly visible so that the activities of these children are often hidden from their parents. When parents do know about their child's activities they may not always try to stop the behaviour since children may bring

money into the household or food items such as a chicken for Sunday lunch. The Innovate Project⁶³ suggests that children who are already at risk in the home are at greater risk outside the home, which can include criminal and sexual exploitation, including county lines activities and joining gangs.

The Commission on Young Lives, reporting on the Department for Education's 'Children in Need' data, has revealed that 12,720 children in England were identified by social services as being at risk of criminal exploitation by gangs in 2020/21.⁶⁴ It warned that the number of children referred to social services in respect of gangs is likely to be the tip of the iceberg, because referrals to social services inevitably fell during the COVID-19 lockdowns when children and young people were largely out of sight of the statutory agencies. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, 100,000 children were living in households where domestic abuse, parental drug and alcohol dependency, and severe mental health problems were present, each of which is a significant risk factor to children being vulnerable to exploitation.⁶⁵ *The Commission on Young Lives* has suggested that:

'Many families in need of help to avert or deal with crises are facing a blizzard of bureaucracy and assessment or, in some cases, just a brick wall.'⁶⁶

Concerns have been expressed about delays in the criminal justice system when young people are arrested mainly due to the introduction, in 2017, of the bail alternative 'Release Under Investigation' (RUI). This has led to many



suspects being kept in 'legal limbo' - this was highlighted to the Commission as a concern.⁶⁷ In October 2022 changes were made to bail and the use of RUI under the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. These address the open-ended status in which RUI could leave young people. The changes oblige the police to release a suspect on a 'pre-charge bail (rather than under investigation) if they are satisfied that it is necessary and proportionate to do so.

The time limits for which a person can be bailed have been extended significantly. But generally, the police can now bail suspects for up to 9 months before they have to request a court extension. This offers some accountability, but they still have the power to transition it to RUI at that point or request a court extension for a

further 12-18 weeks and then again for a further 3-6 months.⁶⁸

Similar to the RUI, we learned that this could leave young people on bail or under investigation waiting for years before a decision is made and whether the case ends up in court. This creates massive emotional and mental stress for young people, their families and, potentially, victims. It also means that a young person may have become an adult in respect to the criminal justice system by the time a decision is made. The question posed to the Commission was whether there should be a time limit for young people being released on pre-charge bail or under investigation without a legal dispensation under exceptional circumstances, and whether that time limit should be six months.

⁶⁰ <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/child-criminal-exploitation-and-county-lines/whatis-county-lines>

⁶¹ *ibid*

⁶² *ibid*

⁶³ See: The Innovate Project Lefevre, M and Firmin, C. (2022) Universities of Sussex and Durham www.theinnovateproject.co.uk

⁶⁴ <https://thecommissiononyounglives.co.uk/new-figures-reveal-12720-children-in-england-were-identified-by-social-services-as-being-at-risk-of-criminal-exploitation-by-gangs-in-2020-21/>

⁶⁵ Commission on Young Lives (2021) First Thematic Reports Briefing

⁶⁶ *ibid*

⁶⁷ Visit to Spark2Life, and Dez Brown, in conversation with the Commission.

⁶⁸ See: <https://www.hickmanandrose.co.uk/pre-charge-bail-and-ru/>

How faith communities can help

The Commission has considered how faith communities should listen to young people who are at risk and enable them to find a way out of the dangers of youth crime. Our discussions with agencies working with young people suggest that there are a number of ways forward. We need to begin by understanding where harm occurs and making sure there are safe environments for young people to socialise to reduce the risk of being lured into criminal activities. This requires faith communities to build relationships with young people, to hear their stories, and not turn away from those who may look or seem threatening:

‘Work with young people, provide activities and support on their terms, care for and value them’⁶⁹

‘Offer an alternative programme of events for youth to be suitably occupied, feel connected and that they belong; develop a mentoring programme; prepare them for and help them find meaningful work; develop an apprentice scheme where they can have a sense of achievement.’

Faith communities have buildings which could be used by young people to meet together and engage in activities. The aim is to offer alternative places in which to find a sense of belonging. Contextual safeguarding and working in partnership with statutory and voluntary agencies offers young people the chance to develop a sense of dignity and respect. It is also essential to take a holistic approach to working with young people by helping families deal with threatening situations when they are themselves a target of criminal activity. This requires us to address the negative stereotyping of young

people and their families, and narratives which label them as ‘bad’.

The leader of *Oasis Global* urges a shift away from negative language and blaming young people. Rather than labelling young people who get into trouble with the police we should be asking ‘as a society, how have we failed this child?’⁷⁰ This change of attitude will encourage inclusion and opportunities for enrichment. We were told how important it is to take young people ‘by the hand’, rather than just arrest them, reset our attitudes to see young people as children who need our support and not as threats to society, listen to them and understand their unsafe places, and share information to keep them safe. This would change the perception of vulnerable children and young people as being ‘the problem’ and view them as ‘having problems’ with which they need help. In this way they can be assisted to see where and how they might be able to take responsibility for their actions and change their thinking.

By linking interventions between school, church and home there is the opportunity to tackle truancy and school exclusions which undoubtedly lead to an increased chance that children and young people will become involved with criminal gangs. Moreover, by developing trust with young people, they may be more likely to talk about the pressures they are feeling and be open to receiving appropriate support before they miss school and before they are criminalised.

‘The Church of England should work closely with schools, youth organisations, police. Offer constructive alternatives e.g. relevant and appropriate youth provision, maybe training for young people in certain skills.’⁷¹

By working in partnership there is real hope that families and households can be supported and children and young people will be diverted from criminal activities and encouraged into more constructive behaviours. We note that there is work being undertaken to introduce a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation within the Modern Slavery Bill and efforts to undertake a national awareness campaign addressed at youth crime and violence, both of which we welcome. The Commission for Young Lives has made recommendations for a new partnership with families to keep teenagers safe from gangs, criminal exploitation and abuse. Public agencies should explicitly recognise the important roles that faith-based organisations, social enterprises and local community groups can play in providing alternative pathways and advocacy for vulnerable children and young people.

The Commission found considerable support for churches and faith groups to do more to work alongside young people at a time when the numbers becoming involved in faith have been dwindling. Rather than being judgemental there is a need to be more aware and more understanding of the challenges faced by young people and the ways in which they may become involved in criminal activities. Anne Longfield⁷² pointed out that it takes a long time to turn someone’s life around but we need to build up relational safety, physical safety and psychological safety. The vast majority of young people have hopes and dreams and we need to hear, respect and encourage them.

We heard about several initiatives that are working alongside young people with a call for these to be more widely available. For example, a 10-week anti-knife crime project, ‘What’s the Point?’, run by Newham Youth for Christ, seeks to equip, educate and empower young people to reduce knife crime. The programme encourages young people to consider knife

crime from different view-points and to think about friendships, social media and role models. The aim is to give young people the confidence to be positively influential among their peers in tackling knife crime. It is also essential to identify the pathways of disproportionality that lead to the criminalisation of young Black boys.

Street Pastors told the Commission that much of their night-time work on the streets is listening to the stories and experiences of young people. The main aim is to listen, care and offer Christian ministry but never to preach. Many of the narratives in the Bible highlight the vulnerability of all children and young people. They need the support and protection of adults throughout their growing years. God describes himself as ‘father of the orphans’. There is a very strong stress that God’s people are expected to care for those children who are most vulnerable. In his public ministry Jesus not only taught and demonstrated the welcoming of children, he also offered them healing and wholeness. Youth is also presented as a time of opportunity, not to be despised by adults, and to be ‘seized’ by the young themselves.

There is acknowledgement that youth crime is a specialist area and needs the skills of professionals working alongside community groups and church communities:

‘This is a specialist area but we [churches] should be showing we care and offering support in brokering support services where they are needed. Where there are youth groups operating, this enables young people to have an alternative and safe place to meet and they may be less likely to be groomed and persuaded into the gang culture.’

We began this part of our journey by exploring the theology of childhood. It urges us to reflect on the effects of sin and trauma in the lives

⁶⁹ Walker, J., (2022) *Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Eight: Children and Young People: parental neglect, youth violence and gang culture*. Briefing Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁷⁰ Steve Chalke, in conversation June 2022

⁷¹ See Briefing Eight

⁷² Anne Longfield, Commission on Young Lives, (2022) in conversation with the Commission

of children in our own culture. It shares with research in psychiatry, sociology, psychology and counselling the recognition that specialised help must be made more widely available to all children who are victims of traumatic experiences, whether public and dramatic, or behind closed doors. As our story of hope and love is demonstrating, we can create optimism when we work together for the common good across disciplines and faiths.

We heard movingly from adults who had been groomed as young teenagers. They told us that at the time this was happening they had experienced the attention from the groomer as someone 'loving' them. They had felt positive about the attention and therefore not sought to expose it. It was only as adults that they realised how wrong this had been and, as one person described it, learning that it had been a very 'unhealthy kind of love'. The impacts of the grooming had undoubtedly marred their adult lives and their ability to accept genuine, nurturing love. We received a number of

proposals for how the Church of England and faith communities can support them in this painful journey of rediscovery, and work to prevent other young people becoming lured into grooming and gang culture. This would include modelling love in every action with a child and young adult, and showing love and understanding to adults who have found themselves in these dangerous situations:

'Create fun youth spaces, get them off the street, feed them, listen to them, accept them, most of what society or sadly the Church often fail to do. That is where Jesus would be. We are sometimes easy to judge over showing love.'⁷³

The encouraging message from a number of those who gave evidence to the Commission was for the Church of England to:

'Start now and promote interfaith initiatives, be seen to work together and be the role model for a more trusting and understanding society.'

⁷³ Contributor to the Call for Evidence



Key Messages from the Commission

This chapter has reminded us of the importance of children being given a strong grounding in developing relational capability, being provided with strong role models in fostering loving, caring relationships from an early age. Our conversations with young people alerted us to the paramount importance of respecting and enabling their right to be heard and respected, and to be invited to contribute to discussions and decision-making about their lives.

As we looked at some of the challenges young people face which create barriers to their being able to flourish we saw the benefits of faith communities working closely in partnership with schools, statutory agencies and families to find solutions and reset attitudes.

1. Relationships are vital for children from the moment they are born.
2. Learning about healthy, loving relationships and developing relational capability and relational intelligence should start as early as possible in life.
3. Learning about the harmful impacts of pornography and sexual behaviours that are not grounded in love, respect and mutual trust, and empowering them to reject them, are essential if children and young people are to be able to develop healthy relationships and build relational capability.
4. Children and young people should learn about:
 - love and its centrality in our lives
 - the importance of strong and stable relationships, including marriage, for our health and wellbeing
 - personal attributes such as kindness, integrity, generosity and honesty
 - recognising, respecting and welcoming difference
5. Talking and listening to children and young people empowers them, builds their resources and develops their skills and knowledge. Every child has the right to have their views heard, especially in respect of decisions which impact on them.
6. Black children and young people are disproportionately represented at all stages of the youth justice system. This adds to disadvantage and marginalisation.
7. Children who are already at risk in the home are at greater risk outside the home, which can include criminal and sexual exploitation, county lines activities and joining gangs.
8. We need to move away from negative language, stereotyping and blaming young people who get into trouble at school or with the police. Rather than labelling young people we should be asking 'as a society, how have we failed this child?'
9. Christian teaching puts emphasis on starting children off on the right path in life, respecting their vulnerability and enabling them to put their trust in the adults around them.
10. The Growing Faith movement in the Church of England should play a leading role in enabling children and young people

to learn about relationships in church, school and at home, preparing them for a future in which abusive and harmful relationships are recognised, understood and rejected, and where healthy, stable and loving relationships can be fostered in childhood, adolescence and throughout life.

11. The Church of England should provide safe spaces to open up sensitive conversations with young people, including about suicide, mental health issues and pornography.
12. Safety and vigilance to prevent harm should be imperatives in all churches and faith buildings at all times.

Recommendations

The Commission urges the Church of England:

Through its dioceses and diocesan boards of education

To:

- Work in partnership with schools and statutory agencies to develop ways to support families in which young people are not thriving in school, are excluded, or getting into trouble.
- Encourage learning about relating well to each other as early as possible in a child's life.
- Make its buildings and open spaces available for children and young people as safe places to be, working in partnership with community organisations, sports, creative arts and youth clubs.

Through the National Church Institutions

To:

- Bring forward proposals which will enable the voices of children, young people and their families to be heard within the church at local and national levels.
- Advocate for a greater understanding of the drivers that draw children and young people into the criminal justice system and to challenge negative attitudes towards children and young people involved in criminal activities.
- Encourage the work of the Growing Faith Foundation to put children, young people and families instinctively at the heart of the Church's ministry and mission.

The Commission urges the Government to:

- Ensure that Relationships and Sex Education is delivered well, consistently, and its effectiveness monitored.
- Encourage learning about relating well to each other as early as possible in a child's life.

- Promote education on the primacy of the early years, supporting parents and carers to promote their (and their child's) wellbeing during the first five years of life.
- Reduce waiting times in the family justice system and the youth justice system.
- Ensure that every child and young person is offered the opportunity to be heard in the family and youth justice systems and kept informed of decisions which will impact on their lives.
- Work with community groups and statutory agencies to urgently address the disproportionality of Black children within the criminal justice system, improve relationships, call out discrimination, and ensure appropriate support is available for young people affected.
- Deliver the National Youth Guarantee by guaranteeing shared safe spaces for every child and young person to gather, play and engage with their peers, with a renewed vision for the place and role of sports, creative arts, community service and youth clubs.
- Include a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation in the Modern Slavery Bill.
- Bring forward proposals to offer specialised help as quickly as possible to all children and young people who are victims of traumatic experiences, whether public or behind closed doors.

8. LIVING IN OUR TIME

*'A sense of mutuality, agency and optimism are all closely connected. We thrive best with others, with the sense of possibility in the future.'*¹

Looking through a historical lens, the Commission tracked the continuing shifts in family life since the late eighteenth century to the present day, highlighting the ways in which, despite many societal events and challenges, 'family' has remained central to everyday life and provided an important protective effect. In our story so far, we have focused on the centrality of strong, stable, caring relationships for our mutual flourishing, the factors which enable children and adults to thrive and those which are barriers to flourishing. Wellbeing and the

ability to flourish as individuals and in families, however, have always been influenced by the world in which people live, alongside their own ambitions, expectations and desires. In every age there have been struggles and hardships, making it difficult for some individuals and families to flourish. Our time is no different. The past shapes the present and the present shapes the future. We can find plenty of societal challenges in the Bible which people had to overcome.

¹ Mulgan., G (2022) *Even in relation to profound problems, over a longer period, you can make a huge difference* RSA Journal Issue 4 p20-25

Societal Challenges in the Bible

The whole story of the Bible is full of societal challenges. The disruptions of the Flood and Babel lead on into the famine in Egypt; the Exodus; the settling of the Israelites in the Promised Land; the establishment of a monarchy; the division of the kingdom; exile into Babylon; the return; and the challenges of Jesus' own day, living in an occupied land through to the turmoil faced by the early church seen in Revelation. Nothing remains settled for very long, although the changes were generally less rapid than the speed of change in the past couple of centuries.

The Scriptures speak into the differing challenges that God's people faced at different times. The law of the Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy) was designed to help God's people live a 'settled' life that showed their faithfulness to the one true Creator God and would make them the light to the nations. The 'Histories' tell the story of their development as a faithful, and frequently unfaithful, people. The prophets are raised up by God to keep calling them back to faithfulness, and offer them hope in the face of their suffering and loss.

One clear example of instructing God's people how to live in a world of diverse beliefs and practices comes when Jeremiah writes a letter to the Israelites in Babylonian exile:

'Build houses and live in them: plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters ... multiply there and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.'
(Jeremiah 29.5-7)

Settle down; get stuck into the life of the city and the nation; seek its well-being; pray for it. Yes remain loyal to God, keep living as God's holy people, but be fully engaged with all that is for the best of the whole nation in which you live. The story of Daniel and his friends then demonstrates just how fully engaged some became at the highest level of Babylonian life. This story also demonstrates that such faithfulness to God could involve deep personal cost.

The image of being 'aliens and exiles' is one applied to the earliest Christians (1 Peter 2.11). These small communities of Jesus' followers were also encouraged to be distinctive as Jesus' people but also fully engaged with the life of the places and people amongst whom they lived. Whatever challenges the society faced they were to be present and engage with it. They were to do so though holding on to a clear vision of God's kingdom. Jesus was abundantly clear that his followers would seek first God's kingdom and righteousness. This would often look counter-cultural as it would be above all else marked by loving service.

God's people throughout the ages have never held that they could resolve all of society's problems. They know this will always be impacted by human sinfulness, frailty and circumstances beyond their own control. But they will always, when being true to their calling, meet the needs of the most vulnerable, and seek true justice for all.

Just as in times past, today's challenges often seem overwhelming, but in order to provide hope for the future and suggest ways for everyone to flourish we must consider our current context.

We asked two questions:

1. What can the Commission learn from the big societal issues of our time and what must the Church of England and civil society do to address them urgently?
2. How should we reimagine a better society for the future and find hope in a complex world?

In this chapter we lay out those big societal issues and the learning we can take from them: it is sobering reading. In the next chapter we explore the opportunities for reimagining the future which enable us to be hopeful.

Emerging from the coronavirus pandemic

'There has been opportunity to slow down and spend more time at home. There has been the opportunity to accept change and to make change which is never easy and is often avoided - so it has helped us to face up to challenges.'²

The most unexpected and daunting challenge this century has been the emergence of a major health crisis. In late December 2019 it was becoming apparent that the world could be on the brink of a global pandemic. By spring 2020, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom had taken the unimaginable step of shutting down the country and requiring everyone, except key and emergency workers, to stay at home. Places of worship were required to close.

One year later in the UK, more than 4.4 million people had been recorded as having contracted COVID-19 and over 127,000 people had died within 28 days of testing positive.³ By the beginning of 2023, COVID-19 had been recorded on 211,000 death certificates in the UK. Although repeated periods of lockdown and a widespread, highly successful vaccination programme had the desired impact of reducing the spread and the deadliness of the virus, by the beginning of 2023 between 300 and 400 people were still dying each week in the UK. Indeed, as we complete our work, COVID-19 remains a virus of serious concern around the world.

The challenge now is to 'live' with the disease and continue to take care of ourselves and others around us. Although all pandemic restrictions in the UK have been lifted, the impacts continue, and we are still learning about the consequences for individuals, families, the economy and society as a whole. As the pandemic took hold we saw the development of mutual aid groups, huge coordinated efforts to support people at an institutional level as well as acts of kindness that made a meaningful difference to people's lives.

There was a shared sense that 'we are all in this together'. Everyone was impacted in some way. We know, however, that how individuals experienced the pandemic varied considerably, despite evidence of a number of key impacts prevalent across society. In the UK, we witnessed variations

'according to sex and gender, sexuality, culture and ethnicity, age, dis/ability and geographical location. In particular, the intersection of each of these factors

² Respondent to the Call for Evidence; Briefing Eleven *Social Change: the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on families and households, and ways in which the church, faith groups and the government can support them*. Briefing Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

³ Misca, G., Walker, J., and Thornton, G (2022) *Families and the COVID19 Pandemic* in P.Fronek and K. Smith Rotabi-Casares(eds) *Social Work in Health Emergencies: Global Perspectives*. Routledge

with socio-economic class and status has amplified the extent to which it is more true to say that 'we are not all in this together' even if we are all in this in some way.'⁴

This observation rings true in respect of most of the challenges of our time.

Impacts on adults

It has become increasingly clear from our Call for Evidence and recent research that some people managed the impacts of the pandemic better than others, to some extent due to their circumstances.⁵ Some individuals and families coped fairly well – people who lived with family members close by, for example, were better equipped to support one another relationally than people who were more geographically mobile, and therefore not near their relatives. However, some more disadvantaged groups experienced increased pressures in their daily life, especially those living in overcrowded accommodation. For some people, the enforced lockdowns provided time to reassess their life, enjoy new past-times, spend more quality time with the family members they live with, and take life at a slower pace:

'Individuals have had more of a chance to reflect on what really matters – COVID has been a big wake-up call. Families have had a chance to rethink balances between work and family in a new way, and to reassess what things are worthy of their time.'⁶

For others, home-schooling and being confined under the same roof with children and family members for months on end while attempting to work from home became an increasing struggle:

'Families where both parents had to work, and also had to home-school led to tensions, stresses, strained relationships and children not getting the education they deserved.'

For many people, especially those living alone, lockdown measures meant debilitating isolation and loneliness, and deteriorating mental health, and self-neglect:

'Self-isolation and social distancing have fuelled anxiety and uncertainty leading to mental health challenges in the young and old.'

For those with underlying health conditions, the threat of contracting a deadly disease was described by some as 'terrifying', especially when medical services were stretched well beyond capacity:

'I have been socially isolating for many months and as a result feel very anxious ... Increased feelings of helplessness and dread.'

For some, being unable to work resulted in serious money worries:

'Stress resulting from financial worry, interruption of careers and loss of a framework for organising time and enjoying friendships.'

The closure of places of worship caused considerable distress for many people who rely on their church family for support and love:

'The overnight disappearance of all support structures for many single parent families, for our family with a severely disabled child: absolute isolation; loss of any support,



therapy or care; helplessness; lack of hope; extremely poor mental health resulting in near crisis situations. We received absolutely no support from our church community, not even to check about how we were!'

Spirituality is an important factor in the development of resilience, and belief systems are key to how the pandemic has been understood.⁷ Although services were offered online and virtual attendance increased substantially, the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture found that the closure of churches in the UK had a serious negative impact on both individual and societal wellbeing.⁸ We were told how 'spiritual seekers', not just regular churchgoers, grieved for the

reality of church.⁹ People who do not normally come to church were relieved when church doors re-opened. They needed to know that someone was lighting a candle or saying a prayer:

'It matters to them more than we recognise or care to remember. Spiritual seekers miss other people singing and the sound of bells ringing ... people outside the church do really care that other people go and worship God proximally to them.'¹⁰

The pandemic revealed a group of people who are largely invisible. They do not go to church but are somehow spiritually dependent on it and for whom the loss of the local church and its activities can be devastating. The lockdowns caused some of these people to become visible,

⁴ Hugman, R., (2022) Foreword in Fronek and Rotabi-Casares op.cit.

⁵ See, Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Eleven *Social Change: the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on families and households, and ways in which the church, faith groups and the government can support them*. Briefing Papers 1 www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁶ This and the following extracts are taken from responses to the Commission's Call for Evidence. Reported in Briefing 11 op.cit.

⁷ Walsh F. (2020). *Loss and Resilience in the Time of COVID-19: Meaning Making, Hope, and Transcendence*. Family process, 59(3), 898–911. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp>

⁸ The Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture (2021) *Churches, Covid-19 and Communities; Experiences, Needs, and Supporting Recovery*. University of York <https://churchesandcovid.org>

⁹ Richards, A., (2020) *Covid-19 and Spiritual Seekers in the UK:2020-2022*

¹⁰ Anne Richards in conversation with the Commission

asking for spiritual help and guidance when their local church was closed. A challenge now is whether and how to find these people and offer them the sanctuary and friendship of the church community.

The most devastating impact for some individuals and families has been the death of a loved one. Restrictions meant that visits to patients in hospital and care homes were not allowed, so thousands of people died without loved ones being with them or able to say goodbye. Moreover, many close family members and friends were prohibited from paying their respects at funerals, and unable to share in the normal end-of-life rituals. Unresolved grief is likely to have negative consequences for years to come.¹¹ There is recognition that people continue to need:

‘Space to grieve - feeling ALL the emotions.’¹²

Impacts on children and young people

While children and young people were less likely to become seriously ill or die with COVID-19, the closure of schools, other than for children of key workers or with very specific needs, meant that they missed out on normal education, were unable to take examinations and had to try to study at home and rely on parents for help:

‘Loss of the structure and routine provided by school or college life; loss of social interaction with peers; having major milestones such as key exams disrupted; anxiety about their futures being disrupted; loss of major rites of

passage such as proms, graduations, key birthday celebrations, loss of contact with grandparents and extended family.’

Education and family life were severely disrupted. Parents who were working from home during lockdowns were juggling work with supervising their children’s education and, in many homes, bedrooms and kitchens doubled as offices and classrooms. Pressure on living space, especially for those with no outside space, could be considerable:

‘In some households there was little space and much pressure on parents as they tried to work from home and home-educate their children. In poorer households there was often only one electronic device to be used by all the children. Tensions could be high in crowded households.’

Children coped well when parents were able to offer structure, attention, and care, adapt to the circumstances and manage their own emotions. Parents with positive coping mechanisms also reported improved relationships with their children. Parents who experienced greater anxiety, money worries, little access to online learning, and mental health issues were more likely to find coping during the pandemic a greater challenge.¹³

Reports by Ofsted and Save the Children indicated that repeated isolation has impacted children’s educational progress during and since the lockdowns. The effects of school closures on education provision, learning and wellbeing have been described as severe for most children, especially for those with disabilities and those from poorer households.¹⁴

The Children’s Commissioner for England pointed out that pre-existing vulnerabilities were exacerbated during the pandemic: unemployment, poverty, mental health issues and domestic abuse all increased due to the pressures of being confined at home.¹⁵ She described a toxic trio of domestic abuse, addiction and severe mental health affecting increasing numbers of children. The ability of parents to cope with such pressures is an important predictor of children’s wellbeing.

Evidence indicates an increase in domestic abuse during the pandemic. Moreover, the ability to seek help and support was limited by the stay-at-home restrictions. Incidents involving death or serious harm to children under five where abuse or neglect was known or suspected increased during the early months of the pandemic. Compared to the same period in 2019, such incidents increased by 31 per cent for children under one and 50 per cent for children aged one to five. The pandemic disrupted the usual pathways for referring children to social services, so children at risk of abuse and neglect may have been missed.

Some of the most challenging aspects of the pandemic for children and young people have been the intensity of families spending huge lengths of time together during lockdowns with limited socialisation outside the home. Where friends were normally providing the support for young people to get through life, lockdowns left them vulnerable and with increasing mental health difficulties. While some young people who were unhappy at school appreciated being able to stay at home, most missed being with their friends and many worried about falling behind with their schoolwork.

Our conversations with teachers have highlighted the longer-term impacts for pupils who have felt fearful about returning to school. They described having to offer special classes to encourage re-integration because of:

‘Loss of confidence. Lack of self-worth. Nervousness returning to school when so far behind. While some families have flourished, some have faced huge struggles through domestic violence.’

Focus on key workers

While the majority of the population were required to work from home, key workers in health and emergency services, social care, police, fire and rescue services and those in sectors providing essential food and transport continued to work. Key workers faced increased risk of contracting COVID-19. Those in healthcare faced a vastly increased workload and heightened levels of stress and anxiety. Some decided to live apart from their families to reduce the risk of passing on the virus, but this added to the stress of the family members left at home and keyworkers being concerned about being less effective in their work on the front-line.¹⁶

Research has revealed the acute stress some nurses and doctors were under, such that some have since left the medical profession. They spoke about burn-out and the overwhelming emotion of seeing so many people die:

‘I am an ITU (intensive therapy unit) nurse. Wearing personal protective equipment – feeling claustrophobic/panicky. Worried about passing COVID to the people I love.’¹⁷

¹¹ Co-op (2020) *A Nation in Mourning Report: Is the UK heading towards a grief pandemic?* Co-op Funeralcare Media Report July 2020

¹² Respondent to the Call for Evidence, Briefing Eleven op.cit.

¹³ Daly, M., Sutin, A., & Robinson, E. (2020). *Longitudinal changes in mental health and the COVID-19 pandemic: evidence from the UK Household Longitudinal Study*. *Psychological Medicine*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291720004432>

¹⁴ Gordon and Burgess, op.cit.

¹⁵ Children’s Commissioner. (2020). *Childhood in the time of Covid*. In *Children’s Commissioner for England Report 2020*. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/childhood-in-the-time-of-covid/>

¹⁶ Misca, Walker and Thornton, op.cit p178

¹⁷ NHS key worker. ibid

We understand that alongside the physical and mental stress, there was a significant spiritual stream of enquiry from keyworkers wanting to understand the meaning of COVID-19, asking how to pray, and wanting to feel pastorally supported and listened to.¹⁸ These needs enable us to see that wellbeing, and physical and mental health, go hand-in-hand with spiritual enquiry.

Assessing the pandemic impacts

Those already facing mental health challenges were more likely to experience a deterioration in their circumstances.¹⁹ By looking in more depth at the various responses to the pandemic, the Commission has uncovered some deep-seated issues and some of the more worrying aspects of life today, all of which need to be tackled:

‘Many individuals living alone have been scarred by the extended isolation. It changes your brain chemistry in bizarre and unexpected ways. We don’t know yet if this will change back. Lockdown exacerbated existing problems. Those in poverty suffered more. Those in abusive relationships had a nightmare beyond imagining. Those working long hard hours to get by had their hours extended, and had to somehow keep their children provided for with no family support. Those with existing mental health problems had to just cope without support with exponentially higher levels of anxiety. It was brutal in a thousand different ways for a thousand different families.’²⁰

The Commission heard many painful and upsetting personal stories of just how the pandemic and the daily restrictions during lockdowns had impacted negatively on many people:

‘Many people never saw or heard from anyone ... Not being able to touch loved ones outside the household, shake hands, give a hug to someone in distress.’

‘Not being able to be with my husband when he died.’

The pandemic drew our attention to the different factors which influenced coping and resilience and the extent to which certain groups in society were significantly disadvantaged:

‘People experiencing a poverty of resources, poverty of relationships, or poverty of identity have, and will continue to be, most impacted by the coronavirus pandemic.’

The Families Un-Locked study of almost 1,000 adults in the UK aged from 18-90,²¹ a longitudinal study tracking reactions and concerns at different stages of the pandemic, has summarised many of the negative impacts. People variously experienced relationship strain and breakdown; felt unsupported or unable to support others adequately; worried about others (children, grandchildren, elderly parents); missed their social interactions, including hugging and seeing family; and feelings of isolation and loneliness. Although not an exhaustive list, relationship issues included conflict, breakdown of communication, different and conflicting attitudes to COVID-19 risks and rules, spending too much/too little time

together, sexual fulfilment, and managing the dynamics of a range of familial relationships, including those with children/stepchildren/ex-partners/siblings and grandparents. The researchers²² have documented the difficulty and hardship across multiple domains:

- managing personal relationships
- juggling or balancing different roles and the associated guilt of not being able to fulfil expected roles well
- dealing with negative feelings
- worry and anxiety (general and COVID-specific)
- being tired or exhausted
- financial worries
- feeling unsupported
- not being allowed to attend church services and funerals
- feelings of both isolation and loneliness

Many participants mentioned mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, and attributed worsening of symptoms to the pandemic and its effects. Personal testimonies vividly highlight the struggles.²³

Although many of the impacts have been detrimental, the Commission also found examples of renewed fellowship in the community and an enhanced protective effect of family resilience, both of which provide a blueprint for the future, which we explore further in the next chapter:

‘The most positive impact has been one of increased support for one another within communities, with neighbours looking

out for one another, and individuals volunteering to help others.’²⁴

Members of local church communities frequently turned their compassion and support which would be normally offered to caring for their church family to caring for neighbours, often people they did not know before the pandemic.²⁵

As research increases into the impacts of the pandemic, we are learning more about the extent of long-COVID, where inequalities are evident.²⁶ There is evidence of heightened depressive symptoms and negative health trajectories. People with pre-existing mental health conditions were adversely affected. The findings²⁷ so far suggest that:

- community-based support is key
- entrenched social inequalities need to be tackled
- more investment is needed in mental health
- there is a need to foster social solidarity and cohesion to buffer health
- kindness should be fostered
- plans for support should be made to ensure that better arrangements are in place before there is another pandemic or health emergency

Inequality, disadvantage and discrimination

‘Inequality cannot be reduced to any one dimension: it is the culmination of myriad forms of privilege and disadvantage.’²⁸

¹⁸ Richards op.cit

¹⁹ Kousoulis, A. et al. (2020) *Coronavirus: The divergence of mental health experiences during the pandemic*. Mental Health Foundation

²⁰ This and the following extracts are taken from responses to the Commission’s Call for Evidence. Reported in Briefing Eleven op.cit.

²¹ Misca, G. (2023) *Families Un-locked: Relationships emerging from Covid-19 into the new normal*, Report on wave 1 qualitative data. Unpublished report, University of Worcester.

²² ibid

²³ See Misca, G (2023) Supporting Papers I www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

²⁴ Contributor to the Call for Evidence

²⁵ Richards, A., (2022) *Loving our Neighbours in ‘The Street’ during the pandemic 2020-2022*. Relational Church e-book <https://relationalchurch.uk/loving-our-neighbours-in-the-street>

²⁶ Fancourt, D., and Steptoe, A., (2022) *The COVID-19 Social Study*: Nuffield Foundation and UCL

²⁷ ibid

²⁸ Joyce, R., and Xu, X., (2019) *Inequalities in the twenty-first century: Introducing the IFS Deaton Review*. <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/33419/1/The-IFS-Deaton-Review-launch.pdf>

The pandemic shone a bright light on the extent of inequalities and showed them to be a major problem in our society today. It is not just about money:

'Inequality exists in the stresses and strains on family life, which shape the environment in which children grow up. It is the divergence in life expectancy between deprived and affluent areas, and the growing burden of poor mental health among disadvantaged groups. It is the pulling apart of successful cities from coastal and ex-industrial towns, where traditional jobs have been lost and young people have few prospects for upward mobility.'²⁹

Racial inequalities and discrimination

'People's capacity to flourish is not related to some innate flourishing capacity, it is related to how people are treated in society.'³⁰

Structural and cultural inequalities emerged during the pandemic to the extent that socio-economic divisions in our society were laid bare. The interaction of racial, socio-economic, and health inequalities, and an increase in the risk of mortality among COVID-19 patients from Global Majority Heritage groups, became more obvious as the pandemic continued. This trend resulted from inequalities relating to the social determinants of health, including the conditions in which people live and work.³¹

Inequality and disadvantage go hand-in-hand. Inequalities between racial or ethnic groups are considered one of the most serious forms of inequality in Britain.³² The existing socio-economic inequalities mean that any attempt to promote the protection and wellbeing of families and households cannot succeed without dealing with these issues in their various presentations.³³

Data from England and Wales found that people from Black and Asian backgrounds accounted for disproportionately higher numbers of critically ill COVID-19 patients and deaths. Lower-skilled and lower-paid occupations, often in the service sector, and occupational inequalities were associated with an increased risk of contracting COVID-19 and of dying. People from Black and Asian backgrounds had higher exposure to the virus and a higher risk of mortality. The Black Caribbean population has had the highest number of per capita fatalities of all:

'the COVID-19 crisis has both revealed and reinforced underlying patterns and trends in inequalities. Dozens of studies have shown how the virus itself and the measures to control it have hit already disadvantaged groups hardest.'³⁴

Concern about inequalities, and perceptions of their causes, have been influenced by our increasing awareness and understanding as a society about systemic disadvantage. This has been highlighted by high-profile atrocities such as the murder of George Floyd in the USA, although many people have been campaigning and warning about discrimination for decades.

However, understanding the origin and characteristics of ethnic inequalities is complex, and patterns of inequality vary between different ethnic groups and generations.³⁵

It is important to recognise that between 1991 and 2011, the White population in the UK grew by less than 2 per cent while all other ethnic groups combined grew by 166 per cent. A majority of Black African individuals are first generation immigrants, while most Black Caribbean people were born in the UK.³⁶ While different groups show different patterns of success in the UK, there is no straightforward or unified story of advantage or disadvantage among the UK's diverse Global Majority Heritage populations.

Understanding why those from different ethnic communities face different opportunities and outcomes is very important if everyone is to enjoy the same chances to flourish. The Commission noted, for example, that Bangladeshi unemployment rates are nearly twice those of the Indian population, yet the high unemployment and low wealth of Bangladeshis is in sharp contrast to their high rates of university entry. When looking at ways to reduce inequality it is essential to be specific in our understanding of difference, and to realise that new patterns of ethnic inequality are emerging in the UK, while persistently disadvantaged groups such as Black Caribbean youth, Muslim men and women, and Gypsy, Traveller and Roma peoples are still being 'left behind'.

'For example, not all Muslims interpret their religion in the same way; there are wide differences between Indians in the type of work they do and their involvement in mainstream institutions; and there are increasing separations between younger

Bangladeshis and their family traditions. And within ethnic groups, men and women often exhibit very different life outcomes.'³⁷

The largest Global Majority Heritage populations in the UK have their roots in the country's colonial past, and the concept of ethnicity itself has racist roots. At a time when the 'Black Lives Matter' movement has been particularly vocal we believe that it is critically important to be sensitive to the ability of language to be hurtful and discriminatory in itself:

'The label 'ethnic minority' ironically refers to peoples who make up 'majority' populations globally, such as Asians or Africans, who yet find themselves defined as 'minority' migrant communities in the UK – even if their ancestors have lived in the UK for three or more generations.'³⁸

These so-called 'minority' groups identify themselves as British. Historical prejudices influence ways in which different groups are marginalised. We see the dangers of this in the current political debates about policies relating to 'illegal immigrants' crossing the Channel in small boats.

More recently the incoming population of the UK has expanded still further. We have seen the displacement of people to the UK through war, famine and economic destitution, dispossessed peoples such as Kurds, Palestinians and Tamils. Before Brexit, the free movement of people across the EU had an impact on net migration. Immigration histories undoubtedly affect socio-economic opportunities, and racial discrimination has significant consequences for the ability to flourish.

²⁹ ibid

³⁰ Professor Sir Michael Marmot in conversation with the Commission in 2022.

³¹ Bamba, C., Riordan, R., Ford, J. and Matthews, F. (2020) *The Covid-19 pandemic and health inequalities*. Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health 2020;74:964–968.

³² Duffy, B., Hewlett, K., Hesketh, R., Benson, R., and Wager, A., (2021) *Unequal Britain: attitudes to inequalities after COVID-19*. The Policy Institute, Kings College, London https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/147984201/unequal_britain.pdf

³³ Akuffo, K., (2021) *Some observations on the tensions between protecting individuals and protecting families* | News | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

³⁴ Duffy et al. op.cit.

³⁵ Mirza, H. S., and Warwick, R., (2022) *Race and Ethnicity IFS*, <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Race-and-ethnicity-IFS-Deaton-Review-of-Inequalities.pdf>

³⁶ ibid

³⁷ ibid p5

³⁸ ibid p10

Race equality legislation in the UK has explicitly recognised the potential impact of racial discrimination and unequal access and representation in UK society on life chances. The Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968 were the first examples of legislation that explicitly addressed racial discrimination. However, it was the racially motivated murder of teenager Stephen Lawrence in 1993 that brought the concept of institutional racism into public discourse, and eventually placed a duty on all public bodies to proactively eliminate unlawful racial discrimination and promote race equality.³⁹ The 2010 Equality Act affords protection from discrimination, harassment and victimisation based on nine 'protected characteristics' such as age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, Race,

religion or belief, gender, sexual orientation, and being married or in a civil partnership. Nevertheless, discrimination continues to manifest itself in a number of different ways.

There is a clear legacy of historical racism from colonialism and the slave trade in contemporary inequalities. Moreover, the current discourse relating to immigration indicates that discrimination tends to reflect different perceptions depending on the country from which people are leaving: so those fleeing from Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Ukraine would appear to be more welcome than those arriving from war-torn and repressive regimes in Syria and Iran. We note, however, that efforts to welcome and house those fleeing from war in Ukraine with families in the UK has been markedly different to the welcome given to others.

³⁹ ibid



Race and skin colour are cited as the most likely grounds for perceived discrimination.⁴⁰ People who are Black in the UK feel discrimination more keenly than others. Whether an individual is born in the UK or not has no statistically significant effect on perceived discrimination, although living in an area with a significant proportion of residents with the same heritage tends to reduce the feeling of discrimination. Despite legislation, however, racial inequalities and discrimination continue. The Commission has been told that

'the magnitudes of modern ethnic inequalities in the UK are often shocking.'⁴¹

Our conversations with experts in racial justice stressed the need to look carefully at the nuances and complexities of racial disparities, understand different cultural behaviours, and empower incoming families to be able to adapt to new cultural norms.⁴² Addressing inequalities in society requires a clear view of the various aspects that influence them, including cultural difference. If we look at the prison population, for example, the average annual prison population quadrupled between 1900 and 2022: from 17,400 to 78,500, and at the end of June 2022, just over 25 per cent were from a 'minority ethnic group'.⁴³ Compared to the population as a whole, those from UK Minority Ethnic/Global Majority Heritage groups were over-represented: 27 per cent compared with 13 per cent in the general population. The proportion of Muslim prisoners had increased from 8 per cent in 2002 to 17 per cent in 2022. We noted similar disproportionality in respect of young offenders. Current projections are for a rising prison population.

⁴⁰ ibid

⁴¹ ibid p113

⁴² Conversation with Lord Tony Sewell (2022)

⁴³ Sturge, G., (92022) UK prison Population Statistics. House of Commons Library

⁴⁴ Conversation with Baroness Kishwer Falkner, Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. (2022)

⁴⁵ *From Lament to Action Report of the Archbishops' Anti-racism Taskforce.* (2021)

⁴⁶ ACRJ website: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/archbishops-commissions/racial-justice/racial-justice-commission-news>

⁴⁷ *First Bi-annual Report of the ACRJ* (2022), Church of England <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/ACRJ%20First%20Report%20-%20Spring%202022.pdf>

The Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)⁴⁴ told us that children and young people should have equal opportunities and equal access to support and the resources that they need to thrive. In this regard, schools should be inclusive and teach pupils about rights and respecting difference, and promote key universal values.

Looking to the future, it is projected that the UK will become increasingly ethnically diverse which makes addressing discrimination and racial inequalities even more urgent. We believe it to be both a moral imperative and a practical necessity. We welcome the establishment of the Archbishops' Commission for Racial Justice (ACRJ) in response to the work and recommendations of the Racial Justice Taskforce,⁴⁵ with the aim to

'set out a compelling agenda for change in careful gospel-driven discernment, balancing the needs of individuals, communities, and society, maximising opportunities, and ensuring fairness for all.'⁴⁶

The ACRJ is examining the way in which history and memory in relation to racism are researched, interpreted, and attended to within structures and institutions in the Church of England:

'One of the core concerns of the Commission is to ensure that the voices of those who have been marginalised and excluded in the Church of England on grounds of race are heard.'⁴⁷

We welcome the work of the ACRJ and its determination to listen to those who are often excluded from discussions about race and racism. Our discussions with the Chair of the Commission, Lord Paul Boateng, indicate that the ACRJ shares our beliefs that there is goodness in every person, that family is central to our wellbeing, and that everyone should be given the best possible opportunity to flourish. Therefore we are confident that the learning of the ACRJ and its recommendations will be of importance well beyond the Church of England. It will be important that recommendations in this area are followed through with adequate resourcing.

Inequalities in health

'Good health is an indication that society is thriving and that economic and social and cultural features of society are working in the best interests of the population.'⁴⁸

The Marmot reviews of health inequalities in 2010⁴⁹ and 2020⁵⁰ pointed to the considerable inequalities in health, and the most recent review highlights the lack of improvement in the ten years since 2010. In addition to cultural inequalities associated with the pandemic, people with underlying health conditions were at particular risk and required to shield, as were those providing their care. Research showed that anxiety levels worsened for those shielding and 35 per cent had heightened mental ill-health. This was especially acute for

those aged over 60.⁵¹ Social isolation, physical distancing rules and restrictions on personal freedoms led to depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal behaviour for many of those who found lockdown especially hard to cope with.⁵² Shielding has had a disruptive effect on people's independence, confidence, social relationships, and mental health, especially for those experiencing inequalities.

Just nine months into the pandemic, the Mental Health Foundation indicated that almost 50 per cent of the UK population had felt worried or anxious.⁵³

'Health inequalities were further aggravated by poor housing and overcrowding, and repeated and lengthy periods of lockdown meant that these problematic conditions were worse for families living in deprived urban communities.'⁵⁴

Since 2010 life expectancy in England has stalled and the decade to 2020 was marked by deteriorating health and widening health inequalities. The social determinants of health include the conditions in which people are born, live and work, and inequities of power, money and resources. Marmot pointed to an increase in poverty, deteriorations in education, and the increased life expectancy gap between rich and poor, all of which indicate the need for different policies to address the issues of health inequalities. There are distinct regional variations in respect of life expectancy: the largest decreases in life expectancy for men

⁴⁸ Marmot, M., (2020) *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On*. The Health Foundation

⁴⁹ Marmot, M., (2010) *The Marmot Review: Fair Society, Healthy Lives*. The Health Foundation

⁵⁰ Marmot, M., (2020) op.cit

⁵¹ Kinmond, K (2020) *Coronavirus: the impact of shielding on m* <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Race-and-ethnicity-IFS-Deaton-Review-of-Inequalities.pdf> mental health and wellbeing. British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy BACP

⁵² Codagnone, C., Bogliacino, F., Gomez, c., et.al. (2020) *Assessing concerns for the economic consequence of the COVID-19 response and mental health problems associated with economic vulnerability and negative economic shock in Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom*. PLoS ONE

⁵³ Mental Health Foundation (2020) *Wave 8: mental health pandemic – key statistics*

⁵⁴ Misca, Walker and Thornton op.cit p172

and women were seen in the 10 per cent most deprived neighbourhoods of the north-east of England.⁵⁵ In 2018, the Health Foundation reported stark differences in health outcomes across the UK – with a gap of almost 19 years in healthy life expectancy between the most and least deprived areas in England. Health inequalities were also apparent by ethnic group. Health impacts of the pandemic have been unequal and have interacted with existing inequalities.

Focus on mental health

'Mental health services and the Christian Church have much in common; they are concerned with the wellbeing and flourishing of people in their social and cultural context.'⁵⁶

Until relatively recently mental health conditions have not been openly discussed and have carried high levels of stigma. In various round table discussions, however, the Commission explored the close link between the church and mental health issues:

'Spiritual wellbeing is too closely interconnected with psychological wellbeing, and it is virtually impossible to measure spiritual wellbeing without invoking psychological concepts, such as peace, relationship, meaning making, and purpose in life. Indeed, according to the canonical Gospels, Jesus addressed the physical, social, and psychological

wellbeing of those to whom he ministered in first century Palestine.'⁵⁷

The earliest Christian hospitals for the mentally ill may be dated back to 4th century Byzantium,⁵⁸ and Christians have played a significant part in the humane approach to treatment for those suffering mental health conditions. There are numerous references in the Old Testament to physical and mental suffering, and in the New Testament, Jesus addresses significant themes of worry and anxiety in his sermon on the mount in Matthew's gospel. We examine the role that faith can play in supporting those who experience mental illness in the next chapter.

Mental health suffered badly during the pandemic. The World Health Organisation warned in April 2020 that new restrictive measures may well lead to increased anxiety, depression, insomnia and increased alcohol and drug use and self-harm. An extensive multi-method research study⁵⁹ found that mental health worsened as the pandemic began, lockdown was enforced, and the numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths were increasing. The symptoms of mental ill-health tended to decrease as a shared perception that the virus would be contained emerged. However, there were clear associations between the severity of social restrictions and mental health. As people experienced loss of income, loss of work, difficulties in accessing everyday essentials, and bereavement, and as worries increased, the negative impacts on mental health were more marked. The study found that:

⁵⁵ The Health Foundation (2018). The gap in healthy life expectancy between the most and least deprived areas in England.: www.health.org.uk/chart/the-gap-in-healthy-lifeexpectancy-between-the-most-and-least-deprived-areas-in-england

⁵⁶ Cook, C., (2022) *Mental Health and the Church A Report for the Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households* Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁵⁷ ibid

⁵⁸ Cook, C. C. H. (2023) *Spirituality and Religion in Psychiatry*. In C. Cook and A. Powell, (Eds.) *Spirituality and Psychiatry*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 1-22.

⁵⁹ Fancourt, D., and Steptoe, A., (2022) *Tracking the Psychological and Social Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic across the UK Population Findings, Impact, and Recommendations from the COVID-19 Social Study* (March 2020 – April 2022) UCL and Nuffield Foundation

'groups that stood out as experiencing psychological challenges during the pandemic included: people of lower socioeconomic status (SES) (which, throughout our research, encompasses those with lower household income, educational qualifications, or employment status); people from ethnic minority groups; adolescents (13-18 years old) and young adults (18-29 years old); women; parents of young children; people with health conditions; and key workers.'⁶⁰

Adolescents and young adults consistently had worse mental health than older age groups.

The Commission became increasingly concerned about the mental health of people of all ages as a result of the pandemic and now more generally. Negative factors include:

'poverty, poor housing, ill health, societal attitudes and behaviours and inequality, as well as familial fracture and poor support and treatment provision. There are many barriers to widespread good mental health which include continuing stigma, lack of knowledge, difficulties within the health and care systems, and a very variable capacity of all caring organisations to work together.'⁶¹

The prevalence of mental health conditions has been growing for some years and is likely to get worse in the aftermath of the pandemic. People with mental health conditions are among the least likely of any group with long term health problems to find work, be in a steady long-term relationship, live in decent housing, and be socially included in mainstream society.⁶² Although there is more willingness to talk about mental health, there is still considerable stigma

and discrimination which can affect all aspects of a person's life and can come from society, employers, the media, 'officialdom', friends and family. Stigma is found in relation to race, ethnicity, class, and religion and other factors which point to difference, and this applies strongly to those with mental health conditions and disability of any kind.

Looking at the mental health issues facing our society, the Commission has found that:

- Multiple factors often combine to protect or undermine mental health.
- The need for mental health support greatly exceeds capacity
- There is a gap in identification, assessment, treatment and on-going support for mental health issues
- The frequently narrow focus on the individual who is the direct recipient of intervention does not allow for a more valuable family perspective
- There needs to be greater understanding of risk factors: discrimination, poverty, adversity, health vulnerabilities in whole families, and how they interact

Fancourt and Steptoe⁶³ recommended that in order to address the increase in mental health challenges, structural inequalities must be urgently addressed, and mental health services need to be bolstered, in particular, to ensure that young people can access support readily.



Poverty

'More than one in three children in families with a child under five are living in poverty – a barometer of social injustice in the UK today.'⁶⁴

In 2021, the *Joseph Rowntree Foundation* reported that millions of people already living in poverty prior to the pandemic were at increased risk of contracting COVID-19.⁶⁵ COVID-19 has killed people in the most deprived areas of England at double the rate of those in the most affluent areas.⁶⁶ These inequalities are not unique to the pandemic: inequalities in mortality have long been evident across many causes of death, for example, suicide, liver disease and cancer. According to the Nuffield Trust, COVID-19 '*highlighted a long-standing and wicked problem.*'⁶⁷

Families living in poverty often struggled and were unable to provide the stable environment needed to help children with home-schooling. A lack of money and a loss of income is especially detrimental for children:

'Experiencing poverty at the start of life and in early childhood can be highly damaging, with potentially profound effects on children's long-term well-being and opportunities.'⁶⁸

Also, the greater the deprivation the greater the frequency of children experiencing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Rates of child poverty are higher for some children from Black, Asian and some Minority Heritage families, and for children living in a family with a child or adult who is disabled. There are considerable variations between members of different

⁶⁰ ibid

⁶¹ Kaplan, C., (2022) The Importance of Mental Health Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁶² ibid

⁶³ Fancourt and Steptoe op.cit.

⁶⁴ Oppenheim, C., (2021) *Changing Patterns of Poverty in Early Childhood*. Nuffield Foundation

⁶⁵ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/data/low-income-and-deprivation>

⁶⁶ https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/resource/chart-of-the-week-covid-19-kills-the-most-deprived-at-double-the-rate-of-affluent-people-like-otherconditions?gclid=Cj0KCQjwzqSWBhDPARisAK38LY8H5npmaLpWiv2kO07G5MYnhswrppM_q_MKxbPMIh6mJyS_aTdtZ_x0aAh9cEALw_wcB

⁶⁷ ibid

⁶⁸ Oppenheim op.cit.

Asian backgrounds. For example, 71 per cent of children from Bangladeshi backgrounds face poverty. Family structure can also make a difference: almost 50 per cent of lone parent families are living in poverty. This level of financial insecurity may well increase as all the impacts of the pandemic are felt. Moreover, children living in the poorest neighbourhoods are at least ten times more likely to be in care than children in the richest neighbourhoods.

A recent review⁶⁹ of the evidence about the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect has found that as underlying social and economic inequalities have increased in England, this has been accompanied by record levels of children in out-of-home care, with more than one child in sixty being investigated for abuse or neglect each year:

'Deep poverty, growing rapidly in the UK in recent years, and persistent poverty are more damaging for children's safety and development, than a low income or temporary difficulties. Insecurity and unpredictability of income, often the result of benefits administration practices, housing and unemployment, compound the problems of parenting with an inadequate income.'⁷⁰

Family poverty and inequality are key drivers of harm to children. The numbers living in deep poverty or destitution have been rising rapidly over recent years,⁷¹ reflected in the increase in the use of foodbanks, for example. The research review suggests that more attention should be given to the structural patterns of gender, age, ethnicity, and health or disability of children and parents influence the ways in

which adverse economic conditions affect family life.⁷² The causes of child abuse and neglect are multi-factorial and poverty is but one element, but we know that an inadequacy of resources and the stresses that families experience are intertwined. Parenting in poverty is highly stressful and this in turn impacts adversely on family relationships. The research review makes two policy recommendations: national levelling up policies need to address deep and persistent poverty; and the children's social care system needs to engage more effectively with the basic material needs of children and families:

'At present many policies, particularly those on benefits, housing and immigration conflict with the principle that the welfare of children should be paramount ...Too often, families feel misunderstood, blamed, mistrusted and threatened rather than helped.'⁷³

Oppenheim points to a number of disruptive forces including increasing levels of in-work poverty, complex family structures, structural inequalities between different communities, difference in the place where children grow up, and rapidly changing economy and labour markets. In 2019/20, 54 per cent of families in poverty with young children had three or more children compared with just 14 per cent of families in poverty who had one child, suggesting an increased level of poverty for larger families. This almost certainly reflects the impact of social security limits – the two child policy – and the abolition of the family element of child tax credits. Changes in social security policy have been more significant for larger families, and the Resolution Foundation predicts

that poverty will continue to rise for families with three or more children.⁷⁴ This is particularly relevant given the evidence that Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Black families are more likely to have three or more children and likely to be disproportionately affected, thereby exacerbating further existing inequalities.⁷⁵ The Commission has noted that benefits are at a 40-year low.

Our exploration of poverty has also found that people living in the most deprived areas of England have a higher risk of suicide – almost double the rate – than those in the least deprived areas.⁷⁶ There was a drop during the pandemic which has not yet been fully explained, but there is increasing concern about the occurrence of suicide ideation among young people and the influence of online material seemingly encouraging suicide.

In 2019, the CEO of the Samaritans had already reported a worrying increase in suicide:

'The rate of suicides in Britain has risen sharply to its highest level since 2002, with men accounting for three-quarters of the number of people who took their own lives last year, official figures show. A total of 6,507 suicides were registered by coroners in the UK – 11.2 per 100,000 people – in 2018, up 11.8% on the previous year, according to the Office for National Statistics. Particular concerns over an increase in the rates of young people aged from 10 to 24 killing themselves, with the overall rate for that age group reaching a 19-year high, and the rate for young females reaching an all-time high.'⁷⁷

The Commission received numerous expressions of concern about the unfairness of many policies

and many calls for reform. Amongst a range of proposals for reform, Oppenheim⁷⁸ has placed emphasis on:

- A multi-dimensional approach that reflects the range of socioeconomic risks and intersecting needs faced by families with young children
- A financial bedrock for families with young children living on a low income, through improved social security benefits and access to employment, which takes account of the care needs of the under-fives
- Greater attention and investment in policies to support parental mental health and parenting from the earliest stage of a child's life

The Cost of Living Crisis

'Millions on the brink of disaster...All around us, warning lights are flashing. There is an economic emergency and all the signs are that it will worsen severely.'⁷⁹

In the first decade of the twenty-first century the western world took a hard knock through a financial crisis which, in this country, badly impacted the housing market and resulted in many years of relative austerity. Then, hot on the heels of the coronavirus pandemic, in 2021 the UK was plunged into a rapidly growing cost of living crisis. In the 12 months to August 2022, domestic gas prices increased by 96 per cent and domestic electricity by 54 per cent. Food prices also rose some 13 per cent and were continuing to rise rapidly in the early months of 2023.⁸⁰ We see all around us that the increase in

⁶⁹ Bywaters, P. and Skinner, G et al (2022) *The Relationship between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect: New Evidence* Nuffield Foundation

⁷⁰ *ibid* Executive Summary

⁷¹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2022) *UK Poverty 2022; the essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK* JRF

⁷² Bywaters and Skinner, op.cit

⁷³ *ibid* p 98

⁷⁴ Resolution Foundation (2022) *The Living Standards Outlook 2022*.

⁷⁵ Hobson, F (2022) *The impact of the two-child limit in Universal Credit*. House of Commons Library.

⁷⁶ Baker, C., (2022) *Suicide Statistics*, House of Commons Library

⁷⁷ Sutherland, R., (2019), *The rise in suicide deaths is an urgent public health issue*. The Samaritans

⁷⁸ Oppenheim. op.cit

⁷⁹ Cooper, N., (2022) *Millions on the brink of disaster*, Church Times 26 August 2022.

⁸⁰ UK Parliament, House of Commons Library, October 2022

the cost of living is causing serious difficulty for many individuals and families.

Recent research from the *Joseph Rowntree Foundation* (JRF)⁸¹ highlights that low-income households’ finances continue to buckle under the pressure of the cost of living crisis: 7.2 million people are going without the basics, and 4.7 million are behind with paying their bills. The research has found that:

‘households on the very lowest incomes are struggling the most, with three quarters of those in the bottom 20% of incomes going without food or other basic essentials like clothing or toiletries. People on Universal Credit (UC), private renters and young adults are all seeing rising and worrying levels of hardship.’⁸²

The impacts are even more problematic now. In the two decades before the pandemic, the number of people living in deep poverty increased from 4.7 million to 6.5 million⁸³, and the pandemic itself created more debt. Consequently, many people were already at a very low ebb prior to the current cost of living crisis. JRF reports that housing shortages, soaring rents and rising mortgage payments are overburdening budgets across the country and describes the outlook as ‘grim’. Those from Black households, families with a disabled member or a member with a mental health condition, and lone parents are expected to struggle disproportionately. Many families will simply go without or fall behind with their rent and paying their bills. The warning for the future is stark:

‘High levels of debt, particularly with high-cost credit, will continue to weaken families’ financial positions and have long-term scarring impacts on their budgets ... These financial scars will run alongside the toll on people’s physical and mental health due to going without essentials and worrying about making ends meet...This crisis is pushing millions to breaking point.’⁸⁴

JRF is calling on the Government to do more to support people as a matter of extreme urgency. In their latest report⁸⁵ relating to the period 2020–2021 in the height of the pandemic, JRF found that 20 per cent of the population were living in poverty, and this included 51 per cent of Bangladeshi households and 44 per cent of Pakistani households. Twenty-seven per cent of children were living in poverty. Families with a disabled member are more likely to be in poverty, as are those living in the rented housing sector. Many of the most vulnerable groups in society before the pandemic continue to be at a very high risk of living in poverty in 2023 while facing the cost of living crisis. JRF⁸⁶ describes its predictions going forward as ‘deeply worrying’: unemployment, prices and rents are expected to rise, and ‘going without’ will continue for individuals and families living in poverty.

Food poverty

‘Parents who have jobs are going without food to feed their children.’⁸⁷

The high rises associated with the cost of living are increasing the need for food banks. Many

people who have traditionally donated food to food banks are now reliant on collecting food for themselves. The choice between heating and eating is only too stark. A household can be described as experiencing food poverty (food insecure) if they cannot acquire an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways. Food prices have been rising since mid-2021. A survey in April 2022 found that 15.5 per cent of households in the UK were food insecure.⁸⁸ Food banks were reporting increased demand and reduced donations as the price rises began to impact on everyone.

Food banks were set up some 20 years ago as a temporary solution to supplying emergency food. Now, over 2,300 food banks in the UK have become essential support for millions of households and families. In the summer of 2022, the *Trussell Trust* distributed 50 per cent more food parcels than before the pandemic. Food banks in the Trussell Trust’s network distributed 61,000 emergency food parcels in 2010/11, rising to 2.5 million in 2020/21 during the pandemic and before the current cost of living crisis took hold in 2022.⁸⁹ The risk of being food insecure is worse for younger people, single parents, social renters, people in poor health, and members of ethnic groups. More and more people are using food banks, including those in professional occupations such as teaching, nursing and social work.

Food insecurity has been linked to chronic health conditions like asthma and depression in children and will impede a child’s physical, cognitive and emotional development.⁹⁰ Food insecurity results in adults having higher rates of chronic diseases such as arthritis, asthma, diabetes and mental health issues, as well as lower life expectancy. Poverty and

food insecurity go hand-in-hand. Children in poverty and people in lone-parent families in poverty are the most likely to be experiencing food insecurity. Moreover, households receiving Universal Credit are much more likely to be experiencing food insecurity. All these people report skipping meals and reducing their expenditure on heating their homes. From all the available evidence, the Commission has learned that:

‘The aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic followed by a cost of living crisis has threatened the food security of millions of people even further. Reduced incomes, increased unemployment and higher food prices have greatly reduced access to food for those affected.’⁹¹

The CEO of *Transforming Lives for Good*, Tim Morfin, has described it as a ‘cost-on-childhood crisis’ as increasing numbers of children are ‘thrown’ into poverty. Cutting back on food expenditure is one of the easiest ways for families to attempt to reduce their spending.

In our conversation with the Trussell Trust they emphasised that food banks do not solve the problem of food insecurity: they merely act as short-term relief from hunger. Households referred to food banks are an extremely vulnerable population. When families need to receive a living income, the focus on survival is not the answer. The large numbers of industrial strikes across many different sectors during the winter of 2022/3 has drawn attention to the impacts of the increased cost of living and the pressure on families to manage to feed their children and limit their debts. Debt advice charities, such as Step Change and Citizens Advice, have been reporting an increase in debt advice clients and an ONS survey showed that 14

⁸¹ Earwaker, R., (2022) *Going under and going without: JRF’s cost of living tracker 2022/23*, JRF <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/going-under-and-without-jrfs-cost-living-tracker-winter-202223>

⁸² *ibid* p1

⁸³ Schmuecker, K et al (2022) *Going without: deepening poverty in the UK*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/going-without-deepening-poverty-uk> (2022)

⁸⁴ Earwaker, op.cit p 26

⁸⁵ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023) *UK Poverty 2023: The essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK*. JRF

⁸⁶ *ibid*

⁸⁷ Major Ralph Walker, Salvation Army minister (August 2022) Church Times p3

⁸⁸ Food Foundation YouGov Survey April 2022

⁸⁹ Trussell Trust (2021) *Building the evidence on poverty, destitution, and food insecurity in the UK*.

⁹⁰ JRF (2023) op.cit.

⁹¹ *ibid* p96

per cent of the 94 per cent of adults who saw an increase in their cost of living in November 2022, reported using more credit than usual.⁹²

We heard many calls for welfare benefits to be increased to disrupt the downward spiral of debt. Although the Government announced in the 2022 Autumn Statement that benefits would rise with inflation, the Trussell Trust has reported that thousands of families are going without meals and not heating their homes in order to reduce the amount of debt they are accumulating. This has devastating effects on people's mental health. The squeeze on finances is made worse since the pandemic because of the cut in Universal Credit following a temporary uplift. The Commission is aware that there have been many concerns about the benefit payments system and the number of deductions made, primarily as a result of advances on payments. The Trussell Trust reported that 47 per cent of people referred to their food banks in summer 2020 were repaying an advance on Universal Credit.⁹³ A key driver of destitution is said to be the debt deductions relating to Universal Credit claims.⁹⁴

We recognise the complexity of debates about welfare benefits, but the Commission has become increasingly concerned about the impacts of the current cost of living crisis, especially on families already struggling before and since the pandemic, and on mental health and family stability. We are mindful of the calls for free school meals to be universally available. Since the pandemic the number eligible for free school meals has increased from 15.4 per cent of state-funded pupils in 2019 to 22.5 per cent 2022. We note that the most over-represented

groups of children eligible for free school meals are Travellers of Irish heritage, Gypsy, Roma pupils and White and Black Caribbean pupils.⁹⁵ Furthermore, being hungry has significant negative impacts on children's ability to learn, hence the pressure on government to provide hot meals at lunchtimes.

What the Commission has seen is the pernicious relationship between deprivation, ill-health, poverty, stress and anxiety which reduces life outcomes and wellbeing and the opportunity to flourish. The inequalities between different groups and between different regions of the UK continue to drive mortality rates and lower life expectancy.

Housing

'Poor housing harms health and evidence shows that exposure to poor housing conditions (including damp, cold, mould and noise) is strongly associated with poor health, both physical and mental.'⁹⁶

The pandemic exacerbated health issues associated with poor housing, and the longer people are exposed to poor conditions, including cold, the greater the impact on health. In 2021 the cost to the National Health Service (NHS) of treating people affected by poor housing conditions was estimated as £1.4 billion each year.⁹⁷

The link between poor housing and poor physical and mental health outcomes is long established. Looking historically, the Nuisances Removal and Disease Prevention Act of 1846 first defined unfit living accommodation to curb the spread of cholera. During the rest of the nineteenth

⁹² Francis-Devine, B., (2022) *Household Debt: statistics and impact on economy*, House of Commons Library

⁹³ The Trussell Trust (2020) *Lift the burden: tackling the Government debts facing people at food banks*.

⁹⁴ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2020) *Destitution in the UK 2020*.

⁹⁵ Francis-Devine, B et al. (2022) *Food Poverty: households, food banks and free school meals*. House of Commons Library

⁹⁶ Marmot, M., (2020) op.cit.

⁹⁷ Garrett, H., et al (2021) *The cost of poor housing in England*, *The Building Research Establishment*; Kulakiewisz, A., and Wilson, W., (2022) *Housing and Health: A reading list*. House of Commons Library



century, successive legislation addressed drainage, running water and sanitation. Since then, attention has been repeatedly drawn to the impacts of continuing inequalities and housing insecurity on health.⁹⁸

The coronavirus pandemic restrictions re-emphasised the housing difficulties of families living in overcrowded accommodation, especially those with no outside space. Overcrowding and unsuitable housing can cause stress, depression and anxiety. Children living in these conditions are likely to be stressed, anxious, have poorer physical and mental health, do less well at school and exhibit behaviour problems. Oppenheim pointed out that 20 per cent of children from a low-income household were living in overcrowded housing during the Spring lockdown in 2020, compared to just 3 per cent of high-income households.⁹⁹

The 2010 Marmot Review emphasised the links between exposure to poor housing conditions

and respiratory conditions, cardiovascular disease and increased mortality. The death in 2020 of two year-old Awaab Ishak from prolonged exposure to black mould in a social housing flat in Rochdale drew media attention to the 450,000 homes in England with condensation and mould. Awaab and his parents came to this country from Sudan and his parents had repeatedly reported the problems. The coroner suggested that Awaab's death should be a defining moment for the housing sector. We saw how easily COVID-19 spread within households and those members with pre-existing respiratory conditions were particularly vulnerable. A study in 2021¹⁰⁰ assessed 11 per cent of the country's housing stock (2.6 million homes) as 'poor quality' and hazardous to occupants, with a possible cost of £1.4 billion a year in NHS treatment bills.

Cold or damp homes can exacerbate existing health inequalities. According to the English

⁹⁸ Preece, J., and Bimpson, E., (2019) *Housing Insecurity and mental health*. UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Excellence
⁹⁹ Oppenheim. op.cit.

¹⁰⁰ Garrett, H., (2021) *The cost of poor housing in England*. The Building Research Establishment

Housing Survey, around 904,000 homes in England had damp problems in 2021.¹⁰¹ Moreover, households with children are more likely than others to have damp in their home, while homes with residents who are over sixty are most likely to live with an excess cold hazard.¹⁰² There is a clear link between inequalities and cold or damp homes: households with an older person, lone-parent households, low income households and households with people from minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely to live in cold or damp homes.¹⁰³ These households are more likely to have to choose between eating and heating. Policy responses to these concerns span across four government policy areas: health, welfare, housing and energy, indicating a need for joined-up approaches to tackle a serious issue for many individuals and families.

The Archbishops' Commission on Housing, Church and Community¹⁰⁴ highlighted in 2021 that around 8 million people in England were living in overcrowded, unaffordable, or unsuitable homes. The Commission's report emphasised that those experiencing poverty bear the brunt of overcrowding. The report argues that there is currently a correlation between poor housing, race, poverty and health, making it incredibly difficult for those in need to solve the problem for themselves. The Commission suggested that five core values should underpin a new standard for what good housing should look like: all homes should be sustainable, safe, stable, sociable and satisfying. Housing, then, is an issue of social justice and equality.

Coming Home points to the lack of affordable housing for people to buy and a lack of social housing, forcing people into the private rented sector. Moreover, 1.6 million low-income working age households spend more than a third of their net income on rent:

'A large number of low-income households are now unable to cover their rent without using income that was intended to pay for other essential living costs, forcing them to make difficult choices between eating, heating and paying their rent.'¹⁰⁵

There is a disproportionate impact on Global Majority Heritage households who are more likely to experience housing deprivation. Coming Home¹⁰⁶ highlights the inequalities:

- 24% of all Bangladeshi households are overcrowded
- Pakistani (18%), Black African (16%), Arab (15%) and Mixed White and Black African (14%) people all experience high levels of overcrowding
- 2% of White British households experience overcrowding
- disabled people account for almost half of all households in poverty

The *Coming Home* report commented that:

'For so many minority ethnic communities, good housing has proved an elusive aspiration.'¹⁰⁷

The lack of suitable social housing to meet the demand, especially when single people are looking for somewhere to live as a result of separation and divorce or after serving a

prison sentence, often causes people to become homeless. Homelessness has soared in recent years. Rough sleeping had more than doubled since 2010 before the beginning of the pandemic lockdown, and at the end of 2019 there were 280,000 people in England who were homeless and in temporary accommodation, an increase of 23,000 since 2016.¹⁰⁸ One third of those who become homeless come from a Global Majority Heritage background.

Local authorities have a duty to secure accommodation for 'unintentionally homeless' households in priority need and families may be placed in temporary accommodation pending an application for social housing. Often the temporary housing is in bed and breakfast settings or in hotels. By March 2021, 95,450 households, including almost 120,000 children were placed in temporary accommodation.¹⁰⁹ Temporary accommodation can often last for months if not years. Almost 20 years ago, *Shelter*¹¹⁰ pointed to the devastating impact on health, education and job opportunities. In 2019,¹¹¹ the then Children's Commissioner described the temporary accommodation in which children were growing up as 'simply inappropriate' and, in 2020,¹¹² concluded that living in bed and breakfast accommodation had amplified the problems for children during the pandemic.

In 2023 we are experiencing a housing crisis which is being elevated by the cost of living crisis. New concerns have revolved around the use of hotel accommodation for asylum seekers. The *Coming Home* report has made it clear that:

'Our current housing, and our plans for new housing, fall far short of the five core values that we have put forward to create a 'good housing system or to build strong community life.'¹¹³

Housing is more than bricks and mortar – it is where we should all feel safe.

Isolation and loneliness

'Having friendship and support is a fundamental part of our wellbeing.'¹¹⁴

The coronavirus pandemic increased the loneliness and isolation of many people, especially young people, the elderly and those living alone. As the pandemic escalated and restrictions on daily life increased, long-term loneliness was associated with an increased risk of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety and severe stress. In 2018 the Government introduced a loneliness strategy to learn more about loneliness and to directly address the impacts. This was before the pandemic and the repeated lockdowns in which social contact was severely curtailed and many people were isolated from friends and family. Respondents to our Call for Evidence¹¹⁵ gave graphic examples of how this had affected them and others:

'Many on their own felt very lonely and isolated. Anxieties have heightened ... Those who were struggling before COVID are practically sinking now.'

¹⁰¹ DLUHC (2022) English Housing Survey on dwelling condition and safety.

¹⁰² Balogun, B., Rankl, F., and Wilson, W., (2023) *Health inequalities: cold or damp homes*. House of Commons Library

¹⁰³ *ibid*

¹⁰⁴ Archbishops' Commission on Housing, Church and Community: (2021) *Coming Home: Tackling the Housing Crisis Together* Church of England

¹⁰⁵ *ibid* p9

¹⁰⁶ *ibid* p24

¹⁰⁷ *ibid* p29

¹⁰⁸ Shelter (2019), *This is England: A picture of homelessness in 2019*

¹⁰⁹ Wilson, W., and Barton, C., (2021) *Households in temporary accommodation in England* House of Commons Library

¹¹⁰ Shelter (2004) *Living in limbo* Shelter

¹¹¹ The Children's Commissioner for England (2019) *Bleak Houses – Tackling the crisis of family homelessness in England*

¹¹² The Children's Commissioner for England (2020) *No Way Out*.

¹¹³ *Coming Home* op.cit p33

¹¹⁴ Campaign to End Loneliness (2020) *The Psychology of Loneliness: why it matters and what we can do*

¹¹⁵ See Briefing Eleven op.cit.

'As a disabled person ... I have personally been in total isolation for 3 months, only seeing family and friends through a window; there have been difficulties getting food delivered. My previously busy life was completely put on hold, and it is now very difficult to pick it up again as so much has changed. Isolation. Drop in personal mental wellbeing. Sense of being imprisoned.'

While social media, FaceTime and Zoom allowed many people to stay in touch remotely, these technologies were not available to everyone, and are not a substitute for physical contact. The most painful aspect of isolation was being unable to be with loved ones who were sick and those who died. Bereavement is one of the principal risk factors for loneliness and this has been a particularly sad aspect of the pandemic, especially for older people. Almost a third of bereaved people aged over 65 report being very lonely after losing a partner.¹¹⁶

Depression can cause loneliness, and loneliness can cause depression. The evidence suggests that people have been touched by loneliness in new ways as a result of the pandemic, and calls for action emphasise the importance of personal relationships, support services that focus on reducing isolation and feelings of loneliness, and access to counselling and support to deal with depression and bereavement. Recognising the impact of isolation and loneliness is essential, especially in the light of the cost of living crisis and the increased anxiety this will bring for the most vulnerable in society.

With one third of households being 'single person', this is a factor in the growth of loneliness and isolation. However, the evidence is clear that living alone does not make someone lonely or isolated. Many feel well supported and connected through their relationships with

family, at work, with neighbours and through their social connections, including churches and other faith communities. The danger of developing loneliness or isolation is clear. People who live with others can feel lonely and isolated, especially if the relationships with those with whom they live have broken down. Strong, caring, and loving relationships matter for everyone.

Most people experience circumstances or occasions on which they feel lonely. A survey¹¹⁷ of 550 partners of Church of England clergy found that 44 per cent reported experiencing 'issues with isolation/making friends'. The survey also found evidence of housing challenges and other stresses on family life. It is the high intensity and long duration of feeling lonely or isolated that cause the most concern since they are commonly associated with fear and anxiety. Talking about loneliness can be difficult, there is stigma to asking for help, and it is all too easy to sink into a downward spiral which results in further isolation. Progress in implementing the Government's loneliness strategy is essential to combat the impacts of loneliness and reduce the stigma associated with it.

Ageing, health and caring

'The pain of grief is just as much part of life as the joy of love: it is perhaps the price we pay for love, the cost of commitment.'¹¹⁸

Loneliness and isolation are often associated with ageing. The amazing advances in medicine in the last half century have enabled many people to live longer and enjoy better health than in generations past. Ageing, then, is to be celebrated. However, people are also living longer with long-term health conditions, and this has increased the demand for social care.

Scripture affords us perspectives on ageing which have the potential to inform our reflections as an ageing society grappling with caring responsibilities, social isolation, expectations around health, and life expectancy beyond retirement. There is the potential for mutual support as well as offering security; there may be enhanced social life. However, there will also be times of sacrifice - in care-giving itself, but also in wealth distribution (including property).¹¹⁹

The Archbishops' Commission on Reimagining Care¹²⁰ has put forward a bold strategy for redesigning the care system so that everyone can flourish, regardless of age or ability. This is a key issue for our time and one which became increasingly evident during the pandemic. Care homes were badly hit by the virus, with many people in residential care contracting and dying of COVID-19. We know, also, that a year after the first national lockdown, ONS data estimated that 6 out of 10 people who had died from COVID-19 were disabled. Currently there is a shortfall of appropriate, high-quality social care in the community to offer support to people to lead a good life. The NHS is also struggling to find suitable arrangements for those who are well enough to leave hospital but need ongoing care and support. The system has been described as 'broken'.¹²¹

In our conversations, Commission members heard moving evidence from people who had experienced the 'loss' of loved ones, not just as a result of COVID-19, but also as a result of conditions such as dementia and Alzheimer's. They spoke of their sadness and concerns about a society that they believed had failed to offer the appropriate support and care for patients

and for their families. One in three people born in the UK in 2023 will develop dementia in their lifetime. There are some 944,000 people with dementia in the UK in 2023 and this number is projected to increase to over one million by 2030 and over 1.6 million by 2050.¹²² There are over 700,000 unpaid carers looking after people with dementia. Caring for someone with dementia is demanding and stressful, and many carers have health issues of their own. Dementia is a growing challenge.

As the population ages and people live longer, it has become one of the most important health and care issues facing us today. Social care is not just a result of our ageing society, however. Almost 50 per cent of local authority social care budgets are spent on care for people who are working age disabled, as people live longer with long-term disabilities.

Al Aynsley-Green spoke about 'anticipatory grief', most commonly found in the context of close relatives of patients admitted for terminal hospice care usually because of cancer. He drew attention to anticipatory grief that has been under-researched and not well understood:

'This is the plight of carers compelled to admit their much loved spouses and partners to long term residential care in a memory care home because of dementia that can no longer be managed at home. This is a 'limbo land' in which the resident is no longer the person she/he was, yet is physically still present though with uncertain longer term survival as the dementia causes the body relentlessly to lose its functions.'¹²³

¹¹⁶ Independent Age: (2018) *Good Grief: older people's experiences of partner bereavement*

¹¹⁷ Clergy Family Network, reported in the Church Times, 17 February 2022

¹¹⁸ Dr. Colin Murray Parkes (1972) *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life*.

¹¹⁹ Gittoes. op.cit.

¹²⁰ The Archbishops of Canterbury and York (2023) *Care and Support Reimagined: A National Care Covenant for England*.

¹²¹ ibid

¹²² UK Dementia Research (2023) <http://www.alzheimersresearchuk.org/>

¹²³ Aynsley-Green, A., (2022) *Loss and love through anticipatory grief caused by dementia* Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

Those who care for relatives and friends with dementia face a slow, excruciating journey watching their loved one move further and further into their own world that excludes everyone else. The carer often suffers overwhelming guilt, sadness, and loneliness as the realisation dawns that their loved one is no longer going to share their life, does not recognise them and all memory of a shared life together has gone. While caring is hard, it can also be life-giving. Aynsley-Green calls for much greater public understanding of the impact of dementia on family members, especially children of a parent with the illness, and the care and support they need while they struggle to do the best for the person who is slowly disappearing from them. He urges much more thinking about, and research into, the impact of dementia on children and young people living in families with a member with dementia. Early onset dementia is affecting at least 46,000 people with several thousand children and young people currently impacted. Children and young people with parents with dementia and other disorders are easily forgotten.

Aynsley-Green reminded us that no one size fits all, but the need for dementia care in society will inexorably increase in coming years as our population ages. He set a challenge for the Government and the Church to do more to realise that:

'suffering is seen to be an essential part of human existence, the way to address it being through compassion and helping others thereby striving to achieve a personal Nirvana. Research into the role of faiths in managing dementia would seem to be a fertile area for study.'¹²⁴

Other worrying challenges facing our society today

The Commission has focused its attention on the impacts of the major societal challenges that have given us much to be concerned and think about as we look for ways to engender hope for the future at a time when much may seem bleak. We are aware, however, that the impacts of climate change and global warming are also especially troubling as our use of fossil fuels and the way we treat our planet have been brought into stark relief here and around the world. Climate change is a major challenge of our time and one which young people are particularly concerned about for their future.

When we started our journey as a Commission, we had not anticipated an illegal and heinous war in Europe some 70 years after the end of World War Two and the unforgettable horrors of the Holocaust. Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has brought untold death and destruction in Ukraine and led to many women and children fleeing their homeland to find safety in England and other European countries. The impacts on vital exports from Ukraine and the restrictions of oil from Russia are resulting in reductions in supplies across the globe. The Russian invasion shows no sign of ending as we conclude our Commission's work and we pray for wisdom, peace and reconciliation before many more thousands of Ukrainian and Russian lives are lost and the war escalates.

Natural disasters such as the earthquake in Turkey and Syria in February 2023, resulting in a vast humanitarian crisis, demonstrate clearly how families and friendships are an abiding source of strength in the midst of devastation. We are reminded that despite the enormous,

and often horrific, challenges and tragedies many people face in our time, individuals and families remain remarkably resilient when they experience the enduring power of love that never ends.

Key Messages from the Commission

The challenges of our time are far too serious for the Church and Government to ignore. There are stark realities that impact many families and households and deter them from flourishing. Our messages are equally stark:

1. COVID-19 has left serious, lasting impacts which cause stress and difficulty for many individuals, children and young people, and families.
2. Increasing interconnected inequalities and discrimination prevent many people from living flourishing lives. There remain acute systemic disadvantages experienced by many on the basis of their protected characteristics.
3. Poverty, including food and energy insecurity, is a scourge of our society, heightened by inflation and the cost of living crisis.
4. Loneliness and social isolation are frequently hidden from view but often lead to mental health problems.
5. The benefits system is in urgent need of reform to address the levels of poverty and need in society.
6. As more people live to older ages, physical and mental health issues are creating increasing demands for loving kindness and adequate social care.
7. We continue to be impacted by appalling wars, the repercussions of climate change and humanitarian crises in our world.
8. Throughout societal crises the Church of England, other churches and members of other faiths have an important role to play in offering support, reassurance and loving kindness to neighbours and strangers.

9. CREATING A KINDER, FAIRER, MORE FORGIVING SOCIETY

*'There are a few rare times when there seems special motivation to focus on the prospects for all of humanity. This is one of those times.'*¹

During the life of our Commission we have seen how families and households are facing an interconnected set of personal and societal challenges threatening their ability to flourish and live the best possible life. While everyday life has been transformed by scientific and medical advances, the inequalities in our society are vast. An Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) Review² stated that:

'There could hardly be a more pressing time to understand how inequalities arise, which ones matter, why they matter and how they should be addressed.'

We have observed inequalities relating to income and wealth, employment, education,

health, especially mental health, ethnicity, where people live, age and life chances, and opportunity. The Church of England is committed to the flourishing of every human being, created in the image of, and loved by, God. Ultimately, the wellbeing of individuals and families is at stake if these inequalities are not removed. It is essential, therefore, that we find ways to be transformative, learning the lessons from an unprecedented pandemic which has drawn attention to the changes we must make to create a kinder, fairer, and more forgiving society now and for future generations. The Commission believes that there are numerous opportunities to be creative, to think radically and imaginatively to envisage how individuals

and families can flourish: this requires effort from every sector of society, including the Church of England.

Having laid out the stark challenges, in this chapter we share our learning as a Commission and our hopes for a better future. First, we consider the steps the Church of England and faith communities can take to mitigate societal challenges and make the most of the opportunities to contribute to a flourishing society; and, second, we highlight the role that government and civil society must play to drive necessary change. Commission members have visited a range of innovative programmes and met many inspirational people, some with a strong religious faith that drives their humanity and commitment to change, and others who do not subscribe to a specific religious faith and are driven by a firm belief in the power of friendship, belonging, care and love.

Building resilience

'The pandemic brought immense challenges and sadness. Despite this, it also brought a renewed sense of familial and community cohesion. This has meant that communities rallied around each other to support individuals who might have been lonely ... the pandemic highlighted the potential for individuals and families within communities to organise around the flourishing of others.'³

So how do we begin to build hope? While the negative impacts of the pandemic are considerable and long-COVID continues to impact the lives of many, the ability of some individuals and families to adapt to the restrictions and to cope with the accompanying

stress led to the development of personal resilience. Looking through a resilience lens, the ability to provide and receive emotional support is key to successful functioning and wellbeing and the extent to which people are able to navigate unprecedented circumstances. As individuals, whether we live alone, in a group, or in a family unit, we are interconnected in various ways, be it as friends, neighbours, with those who provide services in the community such as the postman and the local grocery store, members of a faith group, or members of a family. Family units consist of interconnected individuals who then connect with, and are influenced by, contextual factors such as wealth and access to opportunity. The feelings and reactions of each individual will influence the feelings and reactions of those who are connected with them. These interconnections may provide hope or foster despair.⁴

The *Families Un-Locked* study⁵ has found that some people were able to remain optimistic and seek positive experiences such as taking pleasure in nature, engaging in hobbies, spending time with the family, and appreciating what they had. Some people reached out to others, recognising the centrality of personal relationships. While no-one could control what was going on in the wider world, it was possible for some to create routine and structure within the home, both for oneself and for others. Having a support network proved to be the key to getting through the pandemic restrictions. Many of the accounts demonstrate clearly the importance of family and relationships in building resilience and promoting a positive, optimistic attitude:

'A strong marriage, this experience has deepened the love I feel for my husband ... Good neighbours who we all get on together as friends.'⁶

³ Respondent to the Call for Evidence, Briefing 11 Briefing Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁴ Misca et al op.cit.

⁵ Misca (2023) op. cit.

⁶ ibid

¹ Lord Martin Rees (2022) Under the Microscope: RSA Journal issue 4 p27-29

² Joyce and Xu op.cit

This kind of positive reflection is in deep contrast to the experience of others who lacked a supportive network:

'Loneliness. Misinformed. Scared. Emotional. Stressed. Angry. Unkempt. Mentally challenging. Physically exhausting ... Pessimistic attitude. Lost any vanity/dignity with self-care.'⁷

Respondents to our Call for Evidence spoke of the ways in which they had been able to build resilience and foster hope. For many, this was their connection with a wider church family:

'COVID appears to have drawn people closer to spirituality and to appreciate places of worship and events for communal gathering more than ever before.'⁸

For others it was being more aware of their own communities and valuing neighbourliness:

'Being more local, having less commuting, learning about the possibilities for working from home, spending more time in my community and local environment, finding new walks, appreciating local key workers more; spending time with family/household members; finding out we can do with less (e.g. less travel, less external entertainment).'

'We have all learned the importance of helping others.'

Importantly, building resilience also involved re-evaluating personal relationships:

'More time to spend together has led to pressures around relationships but it has also been a time of growth of recognising how valuable each person is and of wanting each other to flourish and thrive.'

Some people have reported enjoying being able to spend more time together as a family, with more time to talk to each other and do activities together. There are important messages in these responses: in our busy lives it is immensely valuable to be able to spend time in community, to know our neighbours, and be joyful in personal relationships. As we learn to live with the virus it will be important to remember these lessons about what matters in life. Relationships matter.

Small acts of kindness

'When you carry out acts of kindness you get a wonderful feeling inside. It is as though something inside your body responds and says 'Yes', this is how I ought to feel'⁹

Resilience is fostered by small acts of kindness and generosity. Archbishop Justin¹⁰ recognised the need to generate resilience by focusing on relationships:

'Life is sustained and love is renewed both by such simple means as sharing a meal with laughter, or the complex sacrifice of being a carer.'

Some people have seen kindness from neighbours they did not know. The pandemic introduced the concept of the 'bubble' to address loneliness and isolation, recognising that people need each other for support, company and to share experiences. As Julie Gittoes¹¹ reminded us:

'The biblical story began with creation - a garden where it is not good to be alone; where relationships form as helpmates,



partners, parents and children. That story ends with a vision of a heavenly city - united in a common purpose of praise and worship, where the hope of the healing of the nations is fulfilled. This vision of a final home-coming and restored relationships is shot through with music, colour, beauty and joy. It presents a vision of a harmonious order of life together.'

For communities to be sociable and harmonious, there needs to be an intersection between friends and families, households and neighbours. The second great Commandment Jesus gave us is to love our neighbours as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-39): the expectation that we should love others as God loves us. To demonstrate this, community spaces need to build strong connections and facilitate interactions at times of tragedy as well as celebration. The Bible makes repeated

references to the sharing of food and this activity is central to the shared social life in our society:

'Social life in scripture is often framed around the provision or sharing of bread and wine: from daily dependence upon manna in the wilderness, to the sharing of loaves amongst thousands on a hillside, from the miraculous fine wine when resources run low at a wedding in Cana, to the cup of blessing shared in anticipation of a heavenly banquet.'¹²

In the pandemic, the inability to share meals outside the household severely disrupted sociability. However, we are now seeing the increased sharing of food, particularly with those who find the cost of living has reduced what they can spend on food by donating to food banks. Food banks have become an important community space, very many of which are run by church and faith communities. The Christian

⁷ ibid

⁸ Briefing 11 op.cit.

⁹ Rabbi Harold Kushner

¹⁰ Welby (2018) op.cit..p72

¹¹ Gittoes, J., (2022) A Christian Vision of Families and Households. Theology Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

¹² ibid

Children's charity, *Transforming Lives for Good*, supplies hot, healthy meals to thousands of families suffering food insecurity

The rapidly growing *Your Local Pantry* network which involves more than 75 churches is an example of transformative change. These pantries were offering a lifeline to over 90,000 people in summer 2022,¹³ and *Church Action on Poverty* were looking for new partnerships with churches around the country to open more pantries for people struggling to make ends meet. Churches and faith groups across

the country have been stepping up to provide essentials such as food and clothing. The Commission has rejoiced in a range of initiatives undertaken by churches and community groups in different dioceses, which were initially developed to combat the impacts of the pandemic.

The Commission engaged with ten Church of England dioceses to hear about different work designed to offer support in times of difficulty and crisis.

¹³ Cooper, N., (2022) Church Times 26 August

Dioceses offering support around the country

In the Diocese of Rochester: the Commission heard about links made with Green Doctors to offer energy saving advice to people struggling to pay their bills. This includes offering displays and talk spots at community hubs and coffee mornings. Green Doctors are energy efficiency experts who visit people in their homes, helping households to save money and stay warm and well.

In the Diocese of Manchester, the Wythenshawe Team offer breakfast to children and young people during school holidays. During one half-term, they collected, packed and distributed food to more than 120 families, containing 1.9 tonnes of food items.

In the Diocese of Chelmsford, Newham Youth for Christ runs a 10-week anti-knife crime project that seeks to equip, educate and empower young people. The programme leads young people to look at the issue of knife crime from a number of angles, giving them the confidence to be the voice of good influence amongst their peers. Topics covered in the programme include friendship, influences, social media, and role models. The course usually ends with the students delivering an assembly to their peers.

In Chelmsford, the Church of England runs lunch clubs in conjunction with charities and local services, including Barnardo's, Citizen Advice Bureaux, MIND, and the fire service, providing food and social enrichment for families, in addition to giving help with heat insecurity.

In the Diocese of Norwich, the Commission heard about the 'Filling the Gap' project, which was born out of a vision to help families through the summer holidays. The project linked 25 Church of England schools and academies with 24 local parishes and partners including the Salvation Army, food banks, and the SOUL Foundation, to provide weekly food hampers and a weekly activity bag to families in school holidays.

Working collaboratively, colleagues from the Diocese of Norwich Education Team and the Children, Youth and Families contacted schools and academies across the diocese, where head teachers were invited to identify families within their school who would value support with food during the school summer holidays. The project was grant funded and came together with the insight and support of many church communities and voluntary organisations, to offer food as well as social and physical provision for families. The legacy of 'Filling the Gap' continues in that churches have maintained some level of support, built on improved relationships with their schools and communities, and continue to provide for families during school holidays.



As the cost of living crisis bites, churches and faith communities are responding not only by providing food but also by providing warm welcome spaces during winter to help people experiencing fuel poverty. Fuel costs have risen by 178 per cent since winter 2021/2022 and some 16.4 million people are estimated to be in fuel poverty in winter 2022/2023.¹⁴ The aim is for churches and other community spaces to open their doors and offer a warm welcome with 'a cup of tea and cake' to those struggling to heat their homes. People with disabilities, children, elderly people, and those from low-income families and Global Majority Heritage families are likely to be the most severely affected. This initiative has seen over 4,500 warm spaces functioning across the UK, welcoming around four million visitors. When it began, it was coordinated as a joint churches initiative through the ChurchWorks Commission. It became a broad-based community response involving libraries, local theatres, other faith groups, the Together coalition and many others, working closely with local government. It is a clear example of how local and national churches can work effectively in partnership with the breadth of civil society and local government for the common good.

Other initiatives include schemes to offer energy saving advice. As noted in the box, Rochester diocese has linked up with energy efficiency experts, Green Doctors, to give talks at community hubs and visit vulnerable people at home. The responses to food and heat insecurity are excellent examples of acts of kindness inspired by local community humanitarianism. Given the widespread consequences of the pandemic on everyday life, there was considerable consensus in the responses to our Call for Evidence that churches should prioritise support for families and that faith communities

have a vital role to play in supporting individuals and families in a variety of ways. Ideally, as one respondent put it:

'Church and faith groups should provide: 1) a system of support through regular check-ins with people as facilitated by thriving connect groups/cell group structures; 2) food banks and befriending service for drop-ins; 3) small group courses on strengthening relationship skills, coping with anxiety/stress and mental health.'¹⁵

'Church and faith groups need to be able to open doors as often as possible. Be a place for people to gather and be loved to allow them to see that God loves them. Disciples from the church need to go out, find people that need help and respond to their need.'

Not all of these activities require significant financial investment, but they do need people able to play a part and take on more pastoral roles. It is often the very small acts of kindness, however, that mean the most, and simply opening the church door can, as we have heard, offer solace to people in the community.

While churches of all denominations have offered many small acts of kindness, a number of people were critical that before the pandemic, in their experience, the Church of England had not always responded positively to people in need of help, sometimes putting issues such as mental health in the 'too difficult to handle' box. We heard numerous calls for the Church of England to revitalise its place at the heart of communities all over the country, and be a shining beacon of hope in each community, reaching out to offer friendship and care irrespective of whether people come to church or have a religious faith. Encouragingly, we heard about many examples of kindness from local churches happening already:



'Our church has returned to running lunch clubs - and people are telling us they appreciate the company and are feeling less isolated, and we'd love to have more resources to do more of this kind of building community ... Another local church is buying houses for those who struggle, and will have mentors to help tenants get their lives back on track and find jobs ... I'd love for the church to be engaging more on a faith level with people - but at the moment, we are all about meeting basic needs in our community.'¹⁶

Of course, not all churches and faith communities can offer this kind of support. Purchasing houses, for example, will not be something that many churches can do, but during the life of the Commission we have seen how much can be achieved when faith

communities work in partnership with other organisations and local authorities in the local area, sharing resources and skills, and taking a place 'at the table'.

At the present time, as we have witnessed during this Commission, meeting the very basic needs of everyday life has become an increasing problem to solve urgently. Churches are doing their very best to support families and individuals who are struggling, even when church members are themselves having to use food banks. We have been heartened by the huge generosity of faith communities.

The Commission heard about the support offered around the country in 45 Growbaby centres. Growbaby is a faith-based initiative which reaches out to vulnerable families and responds to the specific needs in each local community.

¹⁴ <https://warmspaces.org> and End Fuel Poverty Coalition

¹⁵ Respondents to the Call for Evidence; Briefing Eleven.

¹⁶ *ibid*

Growbaby

Growbaby was established in 2003 as part of the Kingston Vineyard Church and was motivated by faith. The initial aim was to offer free baby clothes and equipment for 0 to 5 year-olds, and this was the 'umbrella' which subsequently developed 'spokes' as the need arose in Kingston. First came antenatal classes for young mothers under 22 years of age who were not accepting of hospital-based services; then came a post-natal group which also offered Skills for Life, and then a post-natal depression group accepting mothers of all ages. Classes to learn English were added for immigrant families as well as parenting classes for families with children of all ages.

Each UK Growbaby centre has developed in a unique way using the 'umbrella' of free clothing and equipment and then filling in the 'spokes' as opportunities arise. This might include the provision of breast feeding drop in services, parenting classes, learning to grow food and prepare it, and parental befriending. Each Growbaby is autonomous and serves its community in a way that is appropriate for local needs. One size does not fit all, and Growbaby functions on the family not franchise model. The Growbaby centres are overseen by Growbaby International who have a role in developing, funding and encouraging new and existing projects. This has led to Growbabys being started in multiple denominations as it expands.

During the lockdown, many Growbabys became a distribution point for formula, nappies and baby food which were delivered to people's homes. Funded by local authorities, subsequently with significant allocation of further funds as the work is seen as being good value for money and able to reach vulnerable families. The Growbaby model is collaborative, working in partnership with statutory agencies. Many of the Growbaby leads sit on safeguarding partnerships or other local bodies.

Growbaby is open to all, regardless of income, faith or background and it provides a non-judgemental relational space for anyone who wishes to attend, but it has proven particularly popular for those who are distrustful of statutory agencies. The principle is that Growbaby will host any appropriate initiative but retains the right to talk about faith without which they do not believe major transformation will take place. Everything Growbaby does is free. Because support is offered regardless of income or faith, Growbaby has been successful in assisting many faith groups in creative ways that provide support without losing their Christian basis. Growbaby's work is based in the Christian faith and their calling is to 'give a megaphone' to families who have voices but are rarely heard because of their 'status' in society. Growbaby believes that a strong faith and declared and open belief in God will enable change.

Growbaby has been established in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and conversations are taking place in several other countries.

Other churches have set up *Renew Wellbeing* spaces in the community which provide a safe space for people to come 'where it's okay not to be okay.' Many have launched activities for young people and reopened youth groups, or developed online activities. Chelmsford diocese told us about their work in a Baby Bank, which had helped a wide range of marginalised people from many different cultures with 21 languages represented. These include: victims of human trafficking; people living in temporary accommodation; and people seeking asylum.

These and many more examples of initiatives that reach out to local communities have highlighted the importance of churches of all denominations and other faith groups building strong partnerships with local authorities, community organisations, including counselling services, and statutory agencies:

'Churches have a key role to play and need to work more effectively in partnership with local authorities and services. They are likely to be better places for early identification of struggles in families and children. Therefore, building up churches resources and equipping churches to care for families, address poverty, and provide family counselling, parent groups, places of safety and refuge for broken families is important. For example: Church-based counselling for families in need: working with families together, to enable better communication, love and care for one another, and to help families flourish.'

'Churches need an understanding of mental health, and of domestic/child abuse so that they respond in ways which are experienced by people as being supportive and demonstrating understanding. In

particular, they need an understanding of trauma informed care.'

We have repeatedly seen how disabled people face a range of inequalities and the Archbishops' Commission on Reimagining Care has highlighted the need for churches to ensure that everyone, regardless of age or ability, is encouraged to participate as far as possible. We believe that this must include a full life, including within their church or place of worship. We heard from people who told us about mobility problems, and the difficulty wheelchair users have in accessing different parts of a church building, including taking communion and leading services. Spaces for wheelchair users are frequently located at the back of the church, with limited ability to feel an integral part of the congregation.

Awareness of the need to ensure that accessibility is properly taken into account has been raised by those seeking to offer greater levels of community support to people with disabilities of all kinds. We were told that hearing loops and facilities for the hard of hearing do not always work, and people who are blind or have limited vision are disadvantaged when the hymns appear on a screen which cannot be seen, making it impossible to join in the service. We believe that the feeling of exclusion can so easily be resolved by small acts of kindness. The Archbishops' Commission on Reimagining Care¹⁷ has noted that small acts of kindness must be backed up by a commitment from the Church of England to remove barriers to participation, including physical barriers.

We have also heard the concerns of those whose loved ones are diagnosed with dementia, and the Commission welcomes the development of dementia-friendly churches. Ian James¹⁸ told

¹⁷ Final report of the Reimagining Care Commission | www.churchofengland.org/about/archbishops-commissions/reimagining-care/final-report-reimagining-care-commission

¹⁸ James, I., (2022) *Training Religious Leaders to Enhance the Wellbeing of People Living with Dementia Through the Delivery of Organised Religious Services*. Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

the Commission that these churches foster the participation of people with dementia and their carers, and in so doing change the attitudes about and increase the knowledge of dementia among the church community as a whole.¹⁹ Practice guides and toolkits are available for Church communities wishing to adopt a dementia-friendly approach to worship. Some 121 churches have become involved, suggesting that there is a long way to go before all churches adopt an approach which would benefit the growing numbers of people facing a very scary illness.

The good news is that religious rituals such as singing and prayers offer enhanced sensory cues for the person with dementia such that religious services:

'Constitute a naturalistic and meaningful psychosocial intervention in their own right, comprised of the service itself and the social context – both of which effectively support the needs of the person with dementia ... lending support to existing policy directives regarding the central role of religious observance in enhancing the wellbeing of people of faith.'²⁰

James suggests that religious leaders might benefit from training to understand fully the nature of dementia and how best to meet people's needs. A central principle of care is to support people's faith, spirituality and tradition, and church services can engender feelings of security, normality, and a sense of belonging in a supportive environment.

Members of our Commission have considered the ways in which clergy and faith communities could be better informed about a wide range of issues. These include mental health, dementia, living with a disability, supporting couple

relationships, and conflict resolution. We encourage the Church of England to consider how best to support clergy and members of the church community to be confident as friendly, caring 'first-responders' to those in need of care and support. In the New Testament, St Paul imagined a church with a diversity of gifted members exercising those gifts so that the collective is equipped and cared for towards 'maturity in Christ' (Ephesians 4).

The Commission has drawn attention to the growing numbers of adults and children facing mental health issues and there is clearly a role for faith communities to be more supportive. A study²¹ commissioned prior to the pandemic by the Bishop of London brought faith leaders from Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Christian and Jewish communities together with mental health professionals to engage in two-way training in a pilot project in two areas of London. The training aimed to enable NHS staff to respond to patients' spiritual needs and faith leaders to respond to the mental health needs of their faith communities. With a better understanding of spiritual needs of patients, treatment plans and medical interventions can be planned taking account of people's faith. This is important as many people rely on their faith community to help them build resilience to get through times of ill-health and other difficult periods in life, as we saw during lockdowns.

Clearer understanding of mental health needs and the role of spirituality in a patient's life can assist people on their healing journey. The project found that wide-ranging interventions can be delivered to patients as part of a co-designed and delivered solution based on a strong partnership between mental health professionals and faith communities. The report has recommended integrated family work,

involving the patients and families from faith and cultural backgrounds to achieve better health outcomes. Moreover, this kind of partnership can empower communities to redirect resources to prevention and awareness of mental health issues, thereby opening up discussion within faith communities about an issue which is often kept hidden.

Dr Obuaya put forward a compelling argument to the Commission about the Church of England's role in destigmatising mental health conditions, improving the general understanding about mental health in the community, and encouraging people to seek help. However, he believes that this does not always happen at the moment and there is a danger that people with mental health conditions can feel marginalised and disconnected:

'Church culture may unwittingly create barriers that prevent Church members from seeking support, either informally within the Church community or from mainstream health care services.'²²

In his view, the Church is in a good position to challenge the stigma surrounding mental health since many members of the congregation and members of the clergy and Church staff may experience mental health difficulties of some sort. By opening up the conversation the Church can break down barriers, normalise the issues, encourage people to seek professional help and spiritual support, and offer a caring, compassionate environment. Being willing and able to have discussions about sensitive personal conditions in a caring way places the church and faith communities at the heart of addressing a growing issue in our society.

Professor Ian Goodyer referred the Commission to research which shows that clergy are currently acting as part of the frontline mental health support and treatment services within their daily lives as priests. He suggested that members of the clergy might find it helpful to undertake training in brief psychotherapy to add value to their existing skills, and contribute much needed expertise to front line mental health care.²³

Addressing the societal issues of our time

'Promoting tolerance, compassion and support for those who need it most.'²⁴

Encouraging faith communities to be less shy about talking about difficult personal issues can extend to talking about other issues of our time. The vast majority of the responses to our Call for Evidence were consistent in the view that the Church of England, other churches and faith groups have an important role to play in helping to reduce inequalities:

'Stronger teaching about why social action and social justice issues are faith issues - how the Christian faith calls us to act upon injustice wherever we find it. Better tools for community organising and activism - greater focus on alleviating root causes of inequality not just mitigation of the results of inequality. Greater focus on working WITH communities of deprivation or experiencing inequalities, rather than doing FOR them. The C of E speaking up centrally against inequality and unjust systems - against women, the poor, LGBTI+ people,

¹⁹ Kevern, P., and Primrose, D., (2020) *Changes in measures of dementia awareness in UK church congregations following a dementia-friendly intervention*. Religions 11 (7) 337

²⁰ James op.cit.

²¹ Health Education England, (2022) *Mental Health and Spirituality: Building workforce competence and capability together*

²² Obuaya, C-C (2022) *Mental health stigma in the church* Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

²³ Goodyer, I., (2022) *Mental health and psychotherapy in the UK today: implications for the clergy* Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

²⁴ Contributor to the Call for evidence: Briefing Twelve: *Social Change: reducing inequalities in our society, and how the needs of individuals can be supported by the church and faith groups, government and the legal system without undermining the family unit*. Briefing Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

refugees/asylum seekers. Encouraging church members to be people who fight for justice and equality in all the different spheres they're in – in business, schools, politics, within their community groups.²⁵

We received strong messages that the Church of England should be active, engaging in advocacy in areas such as poverty, housing, and access to services. This includes being willing to campaign for social justice. There is broad agreement that this is best done by faith leaders working together:

'Firstly it is the church's responsibility to point out inequalities and the impact wherever they see it and it should be a multi-faith effort. Then they should lobby Government to sort it out.'²⁶

Putting pressure on government is regarded by many people as necessary – speaking out against injustice of all kinds and challenging policies that are blatantly unfair or lead to further deprivation:

'We [the Church of England] can tackle inequalities in the earliest years through reducing adversity facing some families (i.e. by addressing poverty and poor housing) and by supporting early relationships and positive interactions which are critical for early development. The Church and faith groups can provide direct services and support to help with these things (e.g. supportive baby and toddler groups) and can also use its voice to campaign for change.'

Some people advocated the selling of Church of England land to build social housing, re-emphasising the recommendations of the Archbishops' Commission on Housing, Faith and Community. We note that the Church Housing

Foundation has been launched to promote engagement between various stakeholders to address housing needs in local communities, and that the Church Commission members submitted a planning application in 2022 for the development of 2,000 homes in West Sussex. Finding ways to alleviate housing need puts the Church of England at the heart of communities.

One of the key themes from the responses referred to the Church of England and faith groups being able to model diversity in order to reduce inequalities:

'Churches have an important role to play in providing a safe and accepting community where all groups are treated equally. Modelling equality is often the most effective way of challenging inequality. This requires leaders to be aware of their own unconscious biases and the need to be working to be as inclusive as possible. Where people can experience positive relationships, and see difference being handled with sensitivity and a desire for understanding, they are more likely to develop and practice those skills themselves, and make a difference in their own school or workplace. Educating ourselves and campaigning about injustice, including poverty, racism, child and domestic abuse and disability issues, is also important.'

Leading by example was a clear message, and promoting inclusivity in the church and faith communities:

'Within our own congregations, breaking down barriers that prevent all people worshipping will enable the body of Christ to be truly diverse and unified. There is a long way for us as churches to go and probably starts with a change in mind-set/culture,

but viewing all people as made in the image of God and churches as places where all nations and peoples of all backgrounds gather as God's diverse people is a first step in enabling barriers (whether race, sexuality, disability, class) to begin being dismantled.'

As the Commission talked to people around the country we observed an appetite for the Church of England to be doing more to support people, regardless of background or culture, in reducing inequalities. These ranged from providing direct support for marginalised groups, using church buildings more imaginatively, actively challenging government policies, to modelling diversity and inclusion in everyday life.

The power of community

'Perhaps one thing we have come to appreciate as a result of the pandemic is the importance of cultivating connections between individual households and families.'²⁷

The interconnections that are so critical to building resilience and addressing the issues of today extend into the communities in which

we live. The Church of England and faith communities have a long tradition of offering care and support to its community members and, often, to the wider community. Now more than ever, faith leaders are called on to offer support in response to crises, tragedies and unexpected events, such as the Grenfell Tower disaster, for example. Faith leaders are often the first to offer support. The role is primarily a pastoral one, to 'walk and be with' people in distress. But in addition to the events which involve faith communities, the acute pressures in our daily lives often lead people experiencing all kinds of distress to seek help. Ensuring that members of the faith community are able to respond appropriately to those seeking help is increasingly important. This means ensuring that faith communities have the resources they need to respond well. We believe there is much to be gained by and celebrated in multi-faith engagement and we have been thrilled to see this in action during our visits to different parts of the country. We were very impressed with the interfaith work we witnessed in Newham, Slough, Birmingham and Bradford. We believe that these communities offer blueprints for interfaith engagement at its best.

²⁷ Gittoes. op.cit.

²⁵ ibid

²⁶ ibid

Case Study: Newham



Commission Members visit Newham, September 2021, accompanied by The Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP

'If Mum is happy, children have a better future; the support offered to immigrants results in healthy, happy kids.'²⁸

The Commission undertook its first evidence-gathering visit to the London Borough of Newham, hosted by the Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP.²⁹ Newham claims to be the most ethnically diverse community in the country, with over 150 languages recorded in an area of high deprivation, high levels of unemployment and homelessness, and a lack of affordable housing which results in severe overcrowding. Moreover, over 50 per cent of the children in

the borough live in poverty and there are an increasing number of single parent households. Commission members were told about many of the acute challenges in the community: youth violence and gang culture; county lines drug trafficking; and a range of social and health inequalities.

Against this backcloth, Newham is a story of hope. The religious diversity within Newham is without doubt a positive influence within the borough, with children and young people growing up with a valuable awareness and a greater understanding of different traditions

and cultures, while also recognising some difficult issues. We heard how important family life is in faith communities and how the faith organisations foster a sense of belonging.

We heard stories of innovative community projects and resilient family life in the face of challenges exacerbated by the pandemic, including food poverty, issues relating to insecure immigration status, and social isolation. This is a community which, despite the challenges of deprivation, thrives on the love found within it. The vital role of local churches and faith groups was evident, as is their commitment to putting co-production and peer-to-peer support at the heart of their work, ensuring that experts by experience could share their valuable insights to benefit others in similar situations.

Ascension Church, 'a church in the community, for the community' builds on a heritage that includes teaching children to swim in the early 20th century in order to survive life around the docks. The focus today is on: children and families; elderly people; people facing poverty; and people with complex needs, including mental health challenges and learning difficulties. Ascension Community Trust employs external advisers who offer advice on housing and benefits, and draws in volunteers from a variety of faiths who live locally. Ascension Community Trust started a food bank two weeks into the pandemic, and now runs the 'Green Community Café', affectionately known locally as 'the place to go if you're not sure where to go for something.' The café has been used for projects such as guitar lessons, work placements for adults with learning difficulties, and a youth centre for after school activities.

The key to success in Newham has been partnership working. For example, a community partnership brought together the National Childbirth Trust (NCT), the Alternatives Trust East London and the Magpie Project to reduce health inequalities for mothers in Newham,

some 66 per cent of whom are born outside the UK. The Alternatives Trust is a charity which began in a local church to support mothers seeking asylum, refugees and migrants and their children, and women experiencing domestic abuse, with counselling, guidance and advocacy. The Magpie Project provides a safe space for mothers with a child under five at risk of homelessness or living in insecure accommodation, to receive housing and immigration advice while their children are looked after. The NCT supports mothers to offer peer support to other mothers in fifteen different languages. The NCT was piloting training for fathers when we visited. Talking with mothers, we heard many personal stories of how the various agencies had brought hope and comfort in difficult circumstances, increasing self-esteem and wellbeing, and instilling a sense of belonging.

Bonny Downs Baptist Church runs a community trust to offer a Family Hub to provide food and community support to over 200 parents and their children each week, give immigration advice, and provide a 'Family Fuel bank' to address wider poverty challenges. The Renewal Programme, a 50-year-old charity established by United Reformed Church churches, provides immigration advice, in addition to grants administered in conjunction with Newham Council. The Renewal Programme manages two homeless hostels, offers an adult training education programme, and peer support for adult carers.

Commission members had the privilege of meeting two families who had come from different countries who welcomed us into their homes. Conversations focused on the challenges caused by the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition imposed on people without indefinite leave to remain in the UK, and questions of identity for children of first-generation immigrants. Faith had supported these families through the pandemic.

²⁸ Young mother in Newham talking to the Commission in 2021

²⁹ See *Visit to Newham* | The Church of England

The visit to Newham illustrated the power of community: first, in highlighting the need for sustainable long-term solutions and appropriate continuous funding for social problems, and for families living in poverty; and, second, the deep value found in local people, local

faith communities working together, and locally-based projects offering the best support possible. It also raised issues of identity for children whose home is England but whose parents are from another country.

Case Study: Bradford

The Commission visited Bradford for two days towards the end of evidence-gathering. Hosted by the Bishop of Bradford, the Rt. Revd Dr Toby Howarth, Commission members met with a range of inspiring people from different faith backgrounds and roles working together to support the residents of the city of Bradford. We heard from faith leaders, youth advisers, the Interfaith Adviser for the Diocese of Leeds, the Maternity Investigator at the Health Care Safety Investigation Branch, members of the Mothers' Union, the Director of the Missional Youth Church Network, the Eden West Bowling Team Leader, and the Director of 'Born in Bradford' Better Start Bradford Innovation Hub and Bradford Inequalities Research Unit. Everyone's huge passion for the city and for the work they do was evident throughout the two days. This heart-warming visit showed us the power of community and the joy of interfaith collaboration in a deprived northern city, and demonstrated the leadership that faith groups can offer, bringing local organisations together to form relationships of trust in the face of serious social and economic challenges.

The single most serious challenge for individuals

and families in this diverse multicultural and multi-faith city is poverty. Most people in poverty are working, often in minimum wage employment, and many in small businesses. The two-child limit in the social security system has a big impact on larger families. Poverty impacts every aspect of daily life and meeting basic needs is a priority:

'Poverty affects not only families and households themselves directly in Bradford through the rising cost of living including especially energy bills, rising interest rates and poor housing, but also the City and District as a whole through the squeeze on public services such as children's services, health, education and social care.'³⁰

In addition to widespread deprivation, Bradford has also seen a steep rise in mental health conditions, especially among children and young people, marriage and relationship problems, and the difficulty of getting into employment which is often exacerbated by racism and especially islamophobia. Asylum seekers and refugee families are frequently placed in Bradford as a result of the relatively cheap housing, and



the economic challenges are often greater for these groups. Responding to the large migrant population, Bradford has built up a remarkable network of support for refugees and asylum seekers as a City of Sanctuary. The Chair of Trustees³¹ at the Bradford City of Sanctuary told us that addressing the myths around asylum seekers is a major and very necessary task. He reminded us of the lengthy administrative process for those seeking asylum, the backlog of claims, and what he described as an inadequate system of support, especially as asylum seekers are moved around regularly with the result that it is difficult to settle.

A city of faith

Bradford prides itself as a city of faith where different religions are working together for peace. Bishop Toby described how the

different faith communities have moved from 'competition' to 'partnership.' He chairs the Stronger Community Partnerships and Team Bradford, ensuring that the Church is at the table in all discussions about policy and practice in every aspect of daily life. Working together as allies across faith communities, faith leaders have led the way in responding to the challenges individuals and families face. They are united in their values, believing in the centrality of families and relationship-building as keys to everyone being able to thrive. This requires acceptance of difference, fostering equality, mutual respect, sharing and a willingness to talk about sensitive issues. Supporting families to flourish is central to all cultures and faiths:

'We are aware in Bradford of the importance of the different faith communities standing and working together to support one another in this time

³⁰ Howarth, T., (2023) Team Bradford. Supporting Papers I www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

³¹ Will Sutcliffe, Chair of Trustees at Bradford City of Sanctuary

of crisis ... At the heart of this network are relationships of trust, often built over many years and in times of stress.'³²

We heard how young people, women and men from Syria, Bosnia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar and Palestine helped in vigils for Ukraine, sharing their own stories of being forced to flee from their homes or living under military occupation, and the way in which those experiences have encouraged them to give practical support and be sympathetic to the needs of refugee families from Ukraine. During the pandemic, faith communities showed extensive generosity to those in need and, more recently, faith organisations are working with local businesses to offer practical support to families who are struggling with the cost of living crisis.

In Bradford, faith plays an important role:

'Within Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities in Bradford, most families have some form of connection with a local faith organisation, either because they pray there, their children attend lessons in a supplementary school setting or they may go to a leader within that local faith setting for personal advice and help with a range of different issues – marriages, divorces, deaths and for faith healing.'³³

This provides many opportunities for churches, mosques, temples and gurdwaras to offer safe and trusted spaces where people can find help and support: the Christian, Sikh and Muslim communities offer relationship preparation and guidance for couples getting married. Two 'Khidmat Centres' provide practical support, tailored services and crisis response to the elderly, people with learning difficulties, and

young people and women leaving prison. The Mothers' Union spoke about support for people experiencing domestic abuse; providing books for children; and organising free holidays to the Yorkshire coast for families to give them a much-needed break. A 'Bag of Love' is given to mothers as they drop their child at school for the first time. There is considerable investment in baby banks, linking with schools, and raising the importance of tackling loneliness amongst older people.

The Commission was particularly impressed by the youth work that is seeking to support young people in Bradford. This is especially relevant given that Bradford is the fourth fastest growing city for young people in the UK. Youth leaders from different faiths work closely together in their mission to engage with young people 'where they are'. The Eden West Bowling³⁴ team, consisting primarily of volunteers, are living and working in an extremely deprived area of the city and building a stronger youth community through after school clubs, a Sunday night youth group, open air play sessions, a Message bus, and much more. The aim is to build confidence and self-esteem through the power of faith, and tackle the problem of county lines activities involving children as young as seven.

The Missional Youth Church Network (MYCN),³⁵ founded by the Archbishop of York's office and the Church Army in 2019, is seeking to enable churches to reach out beyond the walls of religious buildings and connect with unchurched young people aged 11-18 in secondary schools. Support is delivered through a national Learning Community of youth practitioners and youth leaders, training for adult leaders, and a learning community for young people. The MYCN offers safe space for

young people to enhance their self-esteem, and encourages the connections between church, school and family while building relationships with young people and introducing them to faith. *The Linking Network* in Bradford links primary school classes with each other. Secondary schools are linked with care homes. The aims are to break down barriers, help people to learn about each other and find ways to share, open doors and build relationships.

All these initiatives place relationship-building at the centre of their work, with churches and faith buildings open to all to create a haven of peace in stressed lives and bring joy into the lives of very deprived communities: 'friendship is the key to joy.'³⁶ The Commission heard about the tremendous relational power of the Church of England when partnering with other churches, other faith communities, businesses, charities and the public sector, to address what has been described as 'a pressure-cooker of multiple and cumulative challenges'³⁷ and support families and households to flourish.

Born in Bradford

In 2007 a unique series of cohort studies, *Born in Bradford*, was launched in the Bradford Institute for Health Research. During our visit to Bradford, we met with the Director of Better Start Bradford Innovation Hub and Bradford Inequalities Research Unit, Dr Josie Dickerson, to learn about one of the largest research studies in the world, tracking the lives of over 30,000 Bradfordians, including 13,500 children born in Bradford Royal Infirmary between March 2007 and December 2010, and their parents, to discover the influences on the health and wellbeing of families living in Bradford. This

cohort of children are now between 13 and 16 years of age.

Since 2016, the *Born in Bradford Better Start* study has been recruiting families living in selected areas of Bradford to see the impact of early life interventions on the health and wellbeing of mothers and children. The eventual goal is to recruit 100,000 parents and children to become the largest health research project in the world. The Better Start study families comprise: 61 per cent of Pakistani heritage; 12 per cent white British; and 55 per cent migrant, demonstrating huge variation in living experiences and vulnerabilities.

The research has already had a major impact on policies and practices effecting the health and wellbeing of families in Bradford, through a number of significant findings, including the following:³⁸

1. By age 4, 1 in 7 children had been diagnosed with asthma as a result of high air pollution.
2. The beneficial effects of green space are stronger for more deprived groups.
3. At age 3, children are at increased risk of behavioural problems and poor mental health if their mothers experience poor mental health.
4. Poverty and inequality can create barriers to employment and education and negatively impact on health.
5. The first 1,000 days of life can have the greatest impact on childhood obesity.
6. Linking health and education data together allows quick identification of children in need of additional support.

³² *ibid*

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ Owens, L., (2022) *Eden West Bowling* Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

³⁵ Milne, A., (2022) *The Missional Youth Church Network (MYCN)* Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

³⁶ The Revd Jenny Ramsden, Interfaith Adviser for the Diocese of Leeds in conversation with the Commission.

³⁷ Howarth, *op.cit.*

³⁸ Yang, T., with Chew, R., (2019) *Born in Bradford: research that changes a city* (Bradford Teaching Hospitals, NHS Foundation Trust)

The underpinning principle of the studies is co-production with parents and families – ‘nothing about us without us’. This exciting research is enabling an integrated approach to early years’ development to give children and families the best start in life. The Commission was told that this joined-up approach to child health is not only preventing disease and tackling health issues, but also helping children and families to feel safe and be part of the community in which they live, and providing better opportunities for learning, and emotional engagement with arts and culture.

The Commission’s visit to Bradford reinforced our understanding of the power of community and especially the enormous benefits of faith communities working together in partnership

with other agencies and civic society to develop strong relationships with young people, families and households. The network of faith leaders and representatives from different religious groups has broadened and developed to include more women and younger people, making it more attentive to the needs of families and households. Bishop Toby emphasised that:

‘We recognise as faith communities that we still have a long way to go. We are working together to strengthen religious organisations in Bradford in their safeguarding and response to survivors of abuse, and we are looking at ways in which we can be bolder in addressing injustice whether in terms of racism in wider society or gender within our own communities.’³⁹

The Listening Post

The Listening Post is Christian in foundation and was formed in 1991 to relieve emotional and psychological distress by offering anyone who comes a safe space to be heard without being judged, and unconditional positive regard. There is no charge for the service, but people using the service are invited to make a modest donation to the charity.

The Listening Post has turned around the lives of many distressed and unhappy people in different locations across the country. In 2022 *The Listening Post* was awarded the Queen’s Award for Voluntary Service, the highest award for voluntary groups in the UK.

Newham and Bradford offer examples of strong interfaith engagement, harnessing the power of community in areas with multiple challenges to support households and families to flourish. The Commission became aware of many other local initiatives around the country which offer support to individuals and families with a range of concerns. For example, we were inspired by the work of The Listening Post,⁴⁰ a Community Interest Company, which aims to improve the mental health and emotional wellbeing of local communities through the provision of accessible and appropriate professional counselling.

The challenges for policy-makers

‘Achieving genuinely transformative change will require Government to use family as the paradigm through which it addresses some of the biggest challenges facing society and the economy.’⁴¹

The Church of England and faith communities are spearheading a range of exciting and much-needed initiatives in their local communities to address some of the serious personal and societal challenges facing families and households today. They cannot do this alone. Without systemic change at the highest level in government, large numbers of families and households will go without the support they need and will not be able to flourish. Our main message from the Commission, in concert with the Children’s Commissioner, is that ‘family’ must be central to the priorities of every government department. Here we draw attention to some of the programmes that the government is promoting and suggest changes that must be made as a matter of some urgency if families are to be the bedrock of a stable, thriving society.

Levelling up

‘Because we are without doubt one of the biggest and strongest economies in the world we are also one of the most unbalanced.’⁴²

In the Foreword to the *Levelling Up White Paper* in February 2022, the then Prime Minister described a number of ‘radical steps’ to tackle local and regional inequalities as the ‘most comprehensive, ambitious plan of its kind’ that the country had ever seen. The mission was to be part economic, part social and part moral, ‘mobilising all the forces that drive progress and human flourishing,’ and bringing all sectors of society together. In the Executive Summary, however, we note that there is no mention of faith communities and it is difficult to see how the ambition can be realised without them if levelling up means giving everyone in every community the opportunity to flourish.

Nevertheless, the Commission welcomes the ambition, and especially commitments such as a new Youth Guarantee, investment in education and a digital education service, a focus on tackling health inequalities, regenerating local communities, building more affordable social housing and help with buying quality homes, and tackling crime, anti-social behaviour and drug abuse, all of which would appear to be addressing some of the Commission’s concerns. Millions of pounds have been invested in projects around the country. We are promised that by 2030 wellbeing will have been improved in every area of the UK, with ‘the gap between top performing and other areas closing.’⁴³ To achieve this promise, initiatives are needed to address the vast inequalities in society which go beyond health and include discrimination, racial prejudice, deprivation and poverty, and

⁴⁰ listening-post.co.uk

⁴¹ Children’s Commissioner, Family Review Part One. P 79 op.cit.

⁴² Boris Johnson (2022) *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*, White Paper.

⁴³ ibid

³⁹ Howarth, op.cit.

discriminatory attitudes and language.

Tackling poverty must be a primary ambition. Recent research from the IFS/Deaton Review⁴⁴ highlighted the large inequalities in income as wages have not caught up with living costs. Now, two million households are receiving 80 per cent of their income via state benefits. The two-child limit has severely impacted larger families, and there is a lack of support for unemployed families. Whereas William Beveridge was totally opposed to means-testing, we now have increasing levels of means-testing. The message from the research is that many families 'feel crushed by the system' and life is a struggle for so many.

Consistently we have heard the same calls for levelling up to address poverty:

'Those on benefits have felt a big impact of reduction in £20/week Universal Credit uplift, at a time when prices are rising considerably especially for energy and food. The price rises have also impacted

those on low wages and many cannot make ends meet and need to use foodbanks ... Government needs to do more about levelling up the difference in wage disparity.'⁴⁵

'We need central government to make changes so that adequate benefit payments and fair wages exist for all – that social security payments must be adequate, accessible and timely and that wages need to match the cost of living.'

'Government really need to address the poverty gap. Education needs to be overhauled and focussed properly on basic skills and closing the gap. Funding for schools needs addressing. SEND provision is woeful. Care staff need paying properly ... Housing inequality is terrible ... social housing needs to be a priority Without a stable home, education, health and self-development cannot happen.'

⁴⁴ Hoynes, H., Joyce, R., Water, T., (2023) *Inequality and Benefits* IFS/Deaton Review

⁴⁵ Respondents to our Call for Evidence, Briefing Twelve op.cit.

Many of the calls to address poverty refer specifically to reforming the social security system. These included suggestions that an adequate welfare state would ensure a living wage, reconsider benefit caps and conditionality, and increase Universal Credit and provision for childcare. We hear constantly about the spiralling costs of childcare, and recent analysis⁴⁶ has highlighted the lack of provision, especially in London. In London, some 31 per cent of parents are spending between £800 and £1,200 a month on childcare, with almost double the number of children needing childcare than available places. The Commission welcomes the Government's recent announcement in the 2023 Spring Budget that it intends to increase the availability of free childcare to include children aged from nine months, increased wrap-around childcare provision, and more support for those providing childcare.

Late in our work the 'Guarantee the Essentials' initiative emerged from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust. We are happy to endorse this as a potentially strong way forward for tackling the basic question of what constitutes an appropriate minimum level for living in our society today and into the future.

Respondents to our Call for Evidence have called for a better focus on social justice, including the need for the provision of legal aid for those facing both the family and criminal justice systems:

'Access to justice is now not easily available to everyone. The legal aid system is much smaller and harder to obtain. Many cannot afford to pay for legal advice. Advice services are not always available in all areas, especially in the more rural areas. This needs to be addressed.'⁴⁷

In addition to the calls for government to address poverty, respondents⁴⁸ were explicit in their demands for government support in other areas of everyday life:

'The government should ... invest in social housing, supported living, the NHS and travel infrastructures ... education and opportunities ... Schools need investment in their chaplaincy and pastoral support alongside the teams who assess and support young people for additional needs'

'There is a desperate need for mental health services to be improved, especially for young people. Domestic abuse/child abuse need to be taken seriously and victims offered support.'

We heard many calls for support targeted to those most in need, especially to the poorest in society, parents in conflict, children who had missed schooling during the pandemic, and families with a disabled member. Programmes that strengthen community and family cohesion are essential. People who gave evidence to the Commission urged government to provide strong leadership at a time of economic crisis:

'It requires ... a re-imagining of the health, community/housing, education and mental health services which are disjointed, lacking cohesion and inherently imbalanced in its power... Somehow balancing out power, by giving more voice to minority communities, and faith communities as well as strengthening partnerships between governments and community organisations could be a start. Playing an active role in reducing poverty and helping all families have an adequate standard of living would help too.'⁴⁹

While financial investment is crucial, and the Government has laid out plans for this spending,

⁴⁶ See London Early Years Foundation, National Day Nurseries Association and The Fatherhood Institute, open letter to the PM, February 2023.

⁴⁷ See Briefing Twelve op.cit.

⁴⁸ *ibid*

⁴⁹ *ibid*



we would argue that it is not just about money. Collaboration across all sectors of society is essential. More than anything, however, what is needed is a fundamental understanding of what individual and family flourishing looks like and how to promote it. This requires a substantial change in attitudes to focus on the protective effect of family. The kind of society we should aspire to is surely one which values every single human being, recognises the protective effects of loving, caring relationships within families and friendship groups, and builds on everyone’s strengths. Throughout, there must be a commitment to strengthening families and households from all backgrounds and cultures, celebrating diversity, supporting family relationships, and enabling children and young people to flourish and reach their potential. This is about social justice and it means putting the needs and priorities of families at the heart of policy-making.

Creating a new, stronger Family Test

‘Because in many ways, it’s the family where true power lies. So for those of us who want to strengthen and improve society, there is no better way than strengthening families and strengthening the relationships on which families are built.’⁵⁰

In 2014, the government introduced the Family Test, which was updated in 2021, to evaluate systematically the impact of new policies on families. Responsibility for the test lies with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The Family Test requires that a documented process is undertaken which assesses the policy under review according to five aspects about the likely impact on:

- family formation
- families going through key transitions
- families before, during and after couple separation
- families most at risk of deterioration of relationship quality and breakdown
- the ability of all family members to play a full role in family life, including caring responsibilities

The Family Test was designed to embed a relational approach to policy-making and to ensure that policies will support strong and stable families and promote wellbeing. The test established the precedent that families, in all their shapes and sizes, including lone and separated parents and fostered children, and at all stages of life, should be at the heart of all domestic policy-making. It also recognises the value of children’s relationships with extended family members, especially grandparents. For the first time, the Family Test recognised the essential role that families play in shaping communities and society as a whole. It emphasises the importance of early application and continued assessment throughout the policy-making process, scrutinising the policy’s effect on family life. Moreover, the test recognises that strong and healthy parental relationships are a key component of safe, supportive families. The Family Test engendered new funding and support for vulnerable families, including new funding targeted at services for domestic abuse, parental mental health and addiction support.

The Family Test was a major breakthrough in policy-making but its implementation and use have been patchy and have not always been rigorously applied. At its best, it has the potential to highlight any unintended consequences of a policy. In 2019, a review of the test by the Centre for Social Justice⁵¹ found that:

‘in addition to the general guidance produced by the DWP, nine departments have developed internal resources to assist civil servants and ministers in the application of the Family Test. Where we have found examples of bespoke departmental guidance being developed (for example, HM Treasury), this guidance is general in nature and does not extend to helping officials to understand how the policy responsibilities of their department specifically impacts on families.’

The DWP established a Family Test Network to increase the capability of departments to use the Family Test effectively, but the CSJ concluded:

‘From this brief look at examples of the Family Test, it appears that there is often superficial engagement with the Test and little regard to the five component questions that comprise the Test. We are concerned that in examining responses from departments there seems to be a lack of awareness of the role of family within the policy objectives of each department.’⁵²

Recently, the Children’s Commissioner has put forward a proposal for revamping the Family Test in a new Family Framework to ensure that, at every level of design and application, policy ‘thinks family’.⁵³ She would like the test to focus more on the quality of children’s relationships with their parents, and the core priorities of the Family Test re-balanced towards a focus on supporting lasting, nurturing relationships within families, whatever their shape, size or make-up. The Test should be used at local and national government level and applied by organisations developing and delivering services as well as by policy-makers. An updated

framework would insist that services for families would be

- open, non-judgemental and loving
- based on high quality, enduring relationships
- reliable, there for parents no matter what and holistic
- supporting the whole family not just a part of it
- ensuring that wellbeing is an indicator on which policies are assessed

Since relationships are a strong indicator of wellbeing, we believe that wellbeing should be embedded into the family test when all government departments are assessing policies. HM Treasury has suggested that datasets and research have increased the scope to use wellbeing evidence across policy development.⁵⁴

The Children’s Commissioner has requested a review and a reset of the Family Test for the simple reason that ‘every domestic policy has an impact on family life and – consequently – on children.’ The Children’s Commissioner would like to see a new Family Framework which recognises the ubiquity of family life in policy-making and is put on a statutory footing. It should offer policy-makers an opportunity to reflect on the direct and unintended consequences of a policy on family life, both positive and negative.

Our Commission has looked carefully at the Family Test and is sympathetic to the Children’s Commissioner’s proposals for a review in order to strengthen it and ensure it is applied effectively across government in future. We believe that the original five questions about the impacts of any proposed policy are still important, but they could be extended to include the specific impacts on children in line with the Children’s

⁵⁰ David Cameron, British Prime Minister, 2014

⁵¹ CSJ (2019) A Review of the Family Test, CSJ

⁵² ibid p11

⁵³ Children’s Commissioner Family Survey Part Two op.cit.

⁵⁴ HM Treasury Wellbeing Guidance (2021) Supplementary Green Book Guidance

Commissioner's suggestions. We believe that this would be particularly relevant in formulating policies relating to criminal and family justice and could be used helpfully when courts are passing sentence on young people and adults. Every custodial sentence is likely to have an impact on other family members, especially children when a parent is sentenced. This would not necessarily result in a sentence being changed, but it would ensure that the impacts are known, logged and addressed. It also seems sensible to require local government, other agencies and the Church of England to apply a family test when they are formulating new policies and services.

We would add a further requirement that the Family Test must assess the impact of every policy on the ability of individuals and families to flourish. When developing a revised Family Test or Family Framework, we believe that it must have sufficient teeth to require completion and that the answers and outcomes must be recorded. This would indeed demonstrate that family is at the heart of policy-making and the impacts of policies on families are being taken seriously. Patchy implementation is not acceptable.

Family Hubs

'We need to see a far clearer support of family life and, as Family Hubs continue to be rolled out, there is an increasing invitation to churches to be involved with their development in localities.'⁵⁵

The Family Test/Framework should be routinely applied to the development of Family Hubs. In August 2022 the government announced the Family Hubs and the Start for Life Programme overseen by the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education,

involving 75 local authority areas, which will receive funding to deliver a pilot programme. The new Hubs are expected to integrate public health services and support, building on the vision for supporting parents during the first 1,001 days from conception to the age of two, and to deliver the *Healthy Child Programme 0-19* (and to 25 for young people with special educational needs and disabilities).

Churches of all denominations and other faith communities are heavily invested in their local communities, and the Commission has been looking carefully at the role the Church of England can play in the development of Family Hubs. Family Hubs have been developing and evolving for several years in different part of the country prior to the government pilots, some emerging from Sure Start Centres and Children's Centres. The Commission met with the founders of the initiative and also visited and heard about a number of hubs that have been in existence for a few years and are members of the Family Hubs Network. The aim of Family Hubs is to:

'improve children's lives through supporting the family unit and strengthening family relationships to enable children to thrive and keep families together, helping them to provide the safe, nurturing environments that children need.'⁵⁶

Family Hubs should be delivered by skilled professionals in person or online who build trust with families and foster their strengths. A key feature should be the provision of a lead/keyworker for each family to offer a single point of contact. This is particularly important for families who are vulnerable, under stress, and those for whom seeking help is challenging. The Hub should be available to any family facing significant challenges. Taking a whole family approach and with a focus on early help

and prevention, support should be integrated and embedded in the local community. We understand that each Family Hub can develop its own programme of support, taking account of local needs and the local context. Building back from the impacts of the pandemic on families and children requires strong partnership working and information-sharing. We spoke to a number of Hubs which are doing different kinds of work depending on local community needs. The impression we gained is of a burgeoning movement which is experimenting with a variety of models.

We spoke to members of staff at the Isle of Wight Family Hub, run by Barnardo's to reflect local needs. The Hub grew from children's services and has transformed the delivery of family support, through three Hub locations and five spokes. The Hubs provide parenting support, peer support, midwifery and health advice, as well as support for young carers, and a wellbeing service. The Hubs place emphasis on being connected with the local communities, taking a strength-based approach through multi-agency interventions, and offering a team around the family. Agencies such as Home-Start are embedded into the Hubs. The staff told us that they are keen to involve fathers, offer support for relationships and for families who are separating with subsidised mediation. We were told that adult mental health is a priority. There is a desire to work more closely with local churches and faith groups.

Commission members held a meeting to consider how Family Hubs could be developed in one of the most deprived areas of the country. Participants came from Acute and Mental Health, the Integrated Care Group, Children North East, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, Citizens Advice and a local

authority. They agreed a way forward which would include robust evaluation. Since this meeting, the transition from the existing Children's Centre to a Family Hub has been accomplished in Stockton, where a strengths-based approach has led to a positive community response. In Northumberland, eleven children's centres are now linked to six dedicated outreach points in fire stations, a military base and a primary school.

The Government expects its new programme, working with local authorities, to improve health and education outcomes for all; reduce inequalities in health and education for children and young people; and build the evidence-base for 'what works' in order to share best practice. The pilot programme is extremely ambitious.⁵⁷

In her first Family Survey report⁵⁸ the Children's Commissioner found that families prefer to turn to their own networks, family and friends, when they are looking for help. Only 15 per cent of the families surveyed said they would seek help through support forums, and 9 per cent would turn to local community services. As the Children's Commissioner has pointed out, the basic premise of family policy in the UK is that family life is private, and interventions should be kept to a minimum. While this principle is to be valued, there has always been a danger that seeking help is perceived to be a sign of failure. Frequently, parents have not sought help because of the fear that their children might be removed from their care. Attending a parenting course might be seen as an admission by the parents that they are not good enough parents. Similarly, when personal relationships are floundering, only a minority of couples seek help from agencies such as Relate because of the stigma in admitting that their relationships is 'failing'. Research has frequently indicated that

⁵⁵ Contribution to the Call for Evidence Briefing Eleven op.cit

⁵⁶ *Principles of the Family Hubs Model* (2021) Family Hubs Network

⁵⁷ Ibid. The expectations are laid out here

⁵⁸ First Family Survey Report, September 2022 op.cit.

stigma is a major barrier to help-seeking.⁵⁹ The support offered in a Family Hub must always be framed from a strengths-based perspective.

If Family Hubs are to fulfil their ambition to improve children's lives and strengthen family relationships then they will need to be especially welcoming, and show that they are the place to go in the community whenever information and support seems appropriate. Families have said that when they access formal services, they want them to be caring, relational, accessible, welcoming and non-stigmatising, supportive of peer relationships, and inclusive of wider family members. The Children's Commissioner concluded that:

'So much of what families want comes down to empathy, understanding and feeling genuinely listened to.'⁶⁰

In the Second Family Survey⁶¹ the Children's Commissioner, referring specifically to the importance of Family Hubs, recommended that:

- there should be a Family Hub in each neighbourhood, promoting awareness of and access to Family Hubs across the whole community
- there should be increased focus on: the role of the voluntary sector; the role of family hubs throughout childhood; the importance of relationships within the delivery model; and the ability of family hubs to hold and utilise data to integrate services and support families locally.

In other words, Family Hubs need to be truly local, open to all, and integrated with local schools, GPs, health visitors and, we would add, local churches and faith communities. Faith communities need to be around the planning table from the start when each Family Hub is

being designed. Taking account of spirituality is, as we have seen, able to improve outcomes.

Good initial work for faith communities working as partners in Family Hubs has been undertaken by the ChurchWorks Commission.⁶² This has included constructive engagement with government and those taking the lead on developing Family Hub policy. This work needs to be seen not as 'a good extra' but as core and critical to the successful delivery of Family Hubs as truly engaging local communities and organisations as part of those who deliver the best services for families to flourish.

Having spoken to key members of the Family Hubs Network and observed a number of Family Hubs at work, the Commission welcomes the development of Family Hubs around the country. We believe, however, that they could and should be strengthened. The Commission is of the view that:

- Every Family Hub should work to an agreed set of principles, values and standards to ensure high-quality services across the country, and conform to a national system of oversight to ensure that those standards are consistently met
- There should be a core offer of universal services for families of children of all ages – including ante-natal classes, health visiting, parenting courses and relationship support, to be fully resourced and delivered through a Family Hub in every neighbourhood in the country
- Services offering therapeutic support should be required to have a 'family' element to their provision and take a whole-family approach
- Family Hubs should offer relationship support services as a matter of course, and



- not only through the *Reducing Parental Conflict Programme* where it has been shown to be helpful
- Family Hubs should offer information and services to support parents going through family separation, including mediation and other interventions for the couple and for their children
- Family Hubs need to be integrated into wider services seamlessly so that there are no waiting lists at the interfaces
- Every effort should be made to ensure that fathers are encouraged to attend and that services targeted at fatherhood are included
- Consideration should be given to offering services in independent buildings, including church property, to reduce concerns about the stigma of seeking support
- Volunteer and peer support should be developed alongside professional interventions

- Information about Family Hubs should stress that most people value good information about children's development, someone to talk to in confidence about any worries they may have, and that 'it is okay not to feel okay'. Moreover, all families, parents and relationships hit hard times and the key message in Family Hubs should be that it is a sign of strength to seek support. Normalising the use of Family Hubs is essential
- Sharing good practice should be encouraged across the existing Hubs and with the local authority pilot Hubs

The role, place and scope of living in a digital world

The work being undertaken in churches and communities around the country encourages the Commission to be hopeful about a future in which everyone is valued and can be enabled to flourish. We fully appreciate that the world in

⁵⁹ Walker et al (2010) op cit.

⁶⁰ Ibid p78

⁶¹ Children's Commissioner Second Family Survey Report, December 2022 op.cit.

⁶² <https://www.churchworks.org.uk>

which children and young people are growing up today is very different from the world in which their parents and grandparents grew up. Moreover, the world tomorrow will look different again. This is particularly the case given the digital age in which we live which introduces new platforms and new ways of communicating almost daily. Ben Collins, in his exploration of 'digital' in families and households,⁶³ reminds us that:

'If you ask fifty people 'what is digital?' you will get fifty different answers.'

There was very little mention of digital in the responses to our Call for Evidence. In some of our focus groups with young people, however, we were aware that having a mobile phone was integral to their conversations with us, and they often continued to message each other even though they were physically together in the same room. For young people today, 'digital' is fully integrated into their daily lives, whereas for older generations 'digital' is associated primarily with the occasional use of social media, the use of the internet, and Zoom, Teams, and FaceTime. While there is general acknowledgement that digital technology has enabled powerful transformative developments, for example in healthcare, science, defence, and surveillance, concerns are increasingly expressed about the dangers associated with the internet and social media. These are seen to increase the risks for children and young people, particularly around their online safety, thereby contributing to widespread 'digital anxiety'.⁶⁴

Digital is central to our lives and will be increasingly so into the future. Therefore, ignoring digital is itself a greater threat than realising the enormous opportunities it offers:

'Not thinking digital means we are missing a huge element of children and young people's realities. Not thinking digital means we may well miss many of the positives which came from the pandemic. Not thinking digital means missing the opportunity to reflect on some of the most fundamental aspects of our lives, in particular, relationships.'⁶⁵

We have argued in this report that listening to the voices of children and young people is essential for their wellbeing. Yet there is now a huge gap between how children receive and use information and how they communicate with each other and the experience of adults. Collins argues that digital is so integral to a child's life that adults must rethink how they communicate and how they source and share knowledge and information.

A review of the role of digital in social work practice,⁶⁶ an area where hearing the voice of the child is a fundamental principle, found that getting to understand a young person in many cases involves a physical meeting, emails, a video call using Teams, and filling in forms:

'Yet for most children, their realities are constructed from multiple sources, using multiple tools, with information and communication almost always a mixture of text, imagery, and voice. The apps which many adults still risk dismissing as mere entertainment are in some cases the main source of information for children. The gap between the children's reality and that of the adult is wide, and the fragments of information gleaned outside of that child's digital-reality represent an imperfect and incomplete picture at best.'⁶⁷

⁶³ Collins, B., (2023) *The role, pace and scope of digital in families and households – a think piece*. Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁶⁴ ibid

⁶⁵ ibid

⁶⁶ Rethinking Digital. Research in Practice (2022). Unpublished work.

⁶⁷ Collins, op.cit.

Collins argues that with this realisation of a new reality where digital is so integral, we must rethink how we communicate, how we source and share knowledge and information. He suggests that in a world where access to information is potentially infinite, we should spend less time thinking about how we manage and control it and invest more time thinking about how we interrogate and question it.

We saw how during periods of lockdown in the pandemic the use of digital communication enabled many people to communicate and see each other virtually, from home, and for children to receive lessons online. Many churches switched from conducting services in places of worship to holding services online, to great effect. Agencies providing counselling, and which for decades had argued that face-to-face physical interaction 'in the room' was essential to the effective delivery of their service, have successfully changed their practice to provide online interventions. Doctors are offering more and more consultations online. Many of our daily interactions have been forced to change. This behavioural change towards digital has been far less of a shift for younger generations than for older generations.

Members of the Commission explored the way in which dating apps are being used to find partners and look for new relationships. Searching for a partner with whom to develop a life-long intimate and committed couple relationship online is very different from the more 'traditional' process of meeting, courting and developing a relationship. There are many more opportunities to form new friendships and develop personal relationships with people around the world than ever before.

Collins, however, has highlighted how digital has changed the relational space more broadly

than dating and staying in touch. For example, discussions about the pros and cons of being together physically are now influencing the workplace, and about how to keep in touch with family and friends:

'These discussions are the core of relationships. But digital has also caused us to think again about the notion of presence – what does it mean to be in the same physical space as someone else? Is a virtual connection less or more important than a real one? Does a virtual presence hold the same value in our understanding of attachment, and hence to feeling safe?'⁶⁸

These questions are clearly important so the challenge for all of us is how to embrace technology for the good it can offer, and to address digital anxieties constructively, such as how to keep children safe online. This means understanding that for some children and for some adults, online is their safest place, the place where they can experiment, be in control, and feel a sense of belonging. Overall, we are invited to balance the narrative and to broaden the focus. Collins acknowledges that this might feel difficult when families are struggling with the realities of supporting and talking to children who have 'their heads in their phones' and the anxiety of not knowing what they are doing online or with whom. But trying to stop or restrict the use of technology and digital access is increasingly being seen as an attack on rights.

It has been suggested to the Commission that the Church of England and wider society need to:

'embrace the opportunities of digital to rethink how we think about communities and relationships – the opportunity to include others, the opportunity to move beyond single time bound events, the

⁶⁸ ibid

opportunity to extend and blend time, place and people in infinite ways to better respond to individual need.'⁶⁹

Importantly, as a Commission, we have learned that digital is not taking something that is offline and simply putting it online. It is something new. Digital is not a choice for the future, it is an integral part of how society functions. Inevitably there are moral and philosophical dilemmas to be grappled with, but there are new and exciting opportunities too. These are to:⁷⁰

- work out a new paradigm, a new way or making sense of what is a new and different world
- use our curiosity to become positively sceptical, ask more, and not immediately mistrust or dismiss
- embrace the opportunities of digital to rethink how we relate with each other and encourage human flourishing
- learn to question and find new ways to check on the veracity of the information we absorb online

Nevertheless, we must not underestimate the extent of the gap between older adults and children. It is essential to understand the power and importance of online groups, gaming and networks, the languages they produce and the codes used. Moreover, these platforms enable the spiritual search to be construed differently. Building trust between the generations and harnessing the power of digital is a challenge for all faith communities.

Learning from the experience of lockdown, the Church of England has an exciting opportunity to think about how it can best support individuals and families to flourish using the tools and benefits offered by digital, and by partnering with others in their use. By adopting an outward-

facing lens there is much for the Church to do, and we found considerable goodwill within the church to be imaginative in order to foster a kinder, fairer and more forgiving society in exciting new ways.

Looking ahead

'Family should be central to the priorities of every government department. At present too many initiatives are expressed in terms of households, when a focus is needed on the specific needs of children with families. Achieving genuinely transformative change will require government to use family as the paradigm through which it addresses some of the biggest challenges facing society and the economy. Family policy should not be restricted to any one government department or policy area.'⁷¹

The Commission has been very impressed with the efforts being made around the country to tackle some of the impacts of the pandemic and to address the social and economic challenges of our time. To address these challenges well is an enormous agenda and requires all aspects of society to contribute, including the Church of England and other faith communities. The Commission's Call for Evidence gives substance to 'love' in language such as kindness, honesty, commitment, belonging, connectedness, generosity, forgiveness and mutual care. These values will need to be the watchwords for such an important agenda.

The Bible tells a story which speaks to the very heart of what it is to be human - the questions, hurts and struggles; the joys, blessings and hopes. Dwelling on some of those points of connection between that narrative and the stories within it and our own context has offered

inspiration and hope for the future, and the creation of a kinder, fairer, more forgiving society.

There is much work to do, but the Commission is heartened by the Prime Minister's commitment to family in his 2023 New Year message:

'Our vision of change will revitalise every aspect of our lives – better jobs, stronger communities, a world-class education, an NHS built around patients. But family is something politicians struggle to talk about because you can all too readily be pilloried for being out of touch or worse, hostile to those who don't conform to some idealised form. We live in a world today where family can take many forms. But whatever your family looks like, it doesn't matter as long as the common bond is love. We shouldn't be shy about it: We cannot not talk about the thing that is most important in most of our lives. ... Family matters ... When it comes to health, family cares for us when we are sick and old; education – family teaches us values; community – family guides us in right and wrong. That's why family runs right through our vision of a better future.'⁷²

This is a message of hope

Hope is the vision of the prophets of old. Isaiah held out a vision where people of all ages flourish, housing is good for all, work is fulfilling, creation is healthy and every child is born into hope. Zechariah held out a vision of city life where all ages are at peace with each other and society as a whole flourishes. Jesus picked up and developed the hopes of the prophets and proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom in all its fullness where God's goodness and justice are found to the full. This was not a vision to be reached easily, for it involved Jesus himself being betrayed, condemned and crucified. But the reality of his promise came in his being raised from death. Ever since, his followers have sought at their best to develop the vision of societies, in all their diversity, being marked out by truth, kindness, goodness, justice and above all by costly love. Family has always been a central part of that vision of wellbeing. We are all at our best in relationship. It is this vision that above all drives this report and its recommendations: a vision of a society in which everyone discovers life in all its fullness; where everyone can flourish to be the best that they can be.

⁷² The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, Prime Minister, 4 January 2023

⁶⁹ ibid

⁷⁰ ibid

⁷¹ Children's Commissioner ibid p79

Key Messages from the Commission

1. So significant are socio-economic inequalities in England today that any attempt to promote the flourishing and wellbeing of families and households cannot succeed without dealing with the issues of poverty and inequality.
2. Building resilience is an important step in enabling individuals and households to flourish.
3. Small acts of kindness are central to the alleviation of food and fuel insecurities.
4. Working in partnership with health and other professionals, the Church of England, other churches and faith communities have an important role to play in supporting people in their community who are experiencing mental health issues, dementia, and loneliness.
5. Skills in mental health are patchy and opportunities to increase knowledge and skills around mental health conditions would enable clergy and laity to support individuals and families who are dealing with mental health issues, ensuring a high standard of support around the country.
6. When faith groups and professionals come together in a local community they have the power to make substantial positive changes in the lives of individuals, families and households.
7. Ambitions to level up our society require dedicated contributions from all aspects of society. The government cannot achieve this alone.
8. Digital and AI (Artificial Intelligence) are central to the daily life of children and young people, and offer the Church of England exciting opportunities to find new ways of supporting them to flourish.

Recommendations

The Commission urges the Church of England:

Through its dioceses

To:

- Work in partnership with professionals to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for people experiencing loneliness, mental health challenges, and dementia.
- Partner with statutory and other agencies supporting individuals, families and children, ensuring that clergy and laity have the support they need in their pastoral work.
- Work in partnership with community organisations, other churches and other faith groups to provide coordinated support to enable local families and households to flourish.

Through the National Church Institutions

To:

- Encourage an understanding of spirituality in health interventions.
- Advocate for the extension of family hubs, ensuring that faith communities are regarded as partners in delivery, as promoted by the ecumenical Church Works Commission.
- Mirror the use of the Government's Family Test in the development of all policies and practices in the Church of England that affect families and children.

The Commission urges the Government to:

- Ensure that building strong and stable relationships in every family and household is central to the priorities of every government department, with a designated Cabinet level Minister holding responsibility for the implementation, oversight and publication of a family review.
- Prioritise tackling poverty and reforming the social security system so that it better reflects the complex reality of family life.

- Address inequality and widen opportunity by working in partnership with all faith communities.
- Review the Family Test to increase the focus on children and wellbeing; require completion and publication of the assessments to increase transparency and learning across Government; and to be reviewed every three years and updated as appropriate.
- To encourage local authorities and organisations to apply a family test when developing policies and practices that will impact on families and children.
- Develop Family Hubs in such a way that they:
 - are co-created at a local level in consultation with all relevant parties, especially families who will draw on their services
 - work to an agreed set of principles, values and standards to ensure high-quality services across the country, and conform to a national system of oversight to ensure that those standards are consistently met.
 - have a core offer of universal services for families with children and young people, to be adequately resourced to support the agreed principles and values
 - are accessible in every community in the country
 - design their services in consultation with children and young people, mothers, fathers and carers from all kinds of family, including extended and wider family members
 - ensure that they are welcoming, open to all, responding to local demand
 - include the provision of counselling support for all parents whose relationship is in difficulty
 - include the provision of services for parents and children going through separation and divorce
 - are integrated into wider services to ensure seamless transitions at the interface of other services
 - work in partnership with the Church of England, other churches and other faith groups
 - ensure that these priorities are delivered as soon as possible.

10. REIMAGINING THE FUTURE

*'The cure for all the ills and wrongs, the cares, the sorrows and crimes of humanity, all lie in one word 'love'. It is the divine vitality that produces and restores life. To each and every one of us it gives the power of working miracles, if we will.'*¹

We began our story of hope and love recognising that relationality lies at the heart of the biblical vision of what it means to be human. This vision, which puts relationships at the centre, is relevant to people of all faiths and none. Living in community is at the very core of who we are. As we come to the end of our journey, everything we have seen and learned has re-emphasised the importance of, and need for, loving relationships in our daily lives. We know without any doubt that 'family' matters. This is true whether we live alone, in a family group, with a group of friends, or with others in a shared household. Family is the unifying factor across geographical, ethnic and socio-economic boundaries.

Moreover, the Children's Commissioner has pointed out that:

'For children to grow up to be adults that are happy, healthy and contribute to society, there is nothing more important to focus on than family.'²

Ours has been an inspiring and humbling journey of discovery to understand what families and households need in order to flourish, and the actions that the Church of England and Government should take to meet those needs and aspirations. We have celebrated the good in our society and uncovered the bad. We have met people with tremendous resilience and seen acts of great kindness. We have been heartened

¹ Lydia M Child (1802-1880) Native American Rights activist and abolitionist.

² Children's Commissioner Family Survey Part 1 op.cit p 83

by the depth of shared values across different faiths, and realised the tremendous force for good when these faith communities work together both nationally and locally. We have discovered many opportunities for the Church of England to reinforce and celebrate its mission in our multicultural society as the church for all people in all places.

At the beginning of our journey, the Commission was asked what kind of society we want to live in now and into the future. After almost two years of contemplating this question and meeting and speaking to a large number of people, of all ages and from all walks of life, our answer is unambiguous.

We imagine a society that:

- is kind, fair and forgiving, in which every individual, every household and every family is able and supported to flourish
- values everyone for who they are, is not discriminatory, and celebrates the rich diversity in our society
- seeks the common good and rejects discrimination and inequality

In this society:

- love will permeate our relationships and our daily lives
- each of us will be able to love and be loved
- children and young people will learn how to relate well, receive the loving care that they need to thrive, and have every opportunity to reach their potential
- adults will be encouraged and supported to develop and sustain strong, stable, loving and committed relationships however they choose to live their lives
- the Church of England will strive to enable everyone to flourish and live their best life, working in partnership with other churches and faith groups, the public and private sectors, and government

- all government policies will have the wellbeing of families and households at their heart.

We do not believe that our vision is idealised, fanciful or unattainable. Nor does it necessarily require huge financial investment, although we recognise that some of our recommendations to the Church of England and to Government will need to be adequately resourced. We all have a role to play in fostering a change in culture and attitude that allows a different narrative to dominate – a narrative that shows we care for each other and, in biblical terms, demonstrates that we love our neighbour as ourselves.

The Commission's vision is consistent with the Church of England's own vision, launched by the Archbishop of York in November 2020,³ for:

'a younger and more diverse church, a church that serves children and young people and involves them in its leadership and ministry; a church where Black lives matter; an enabling church for disabled people; and a church that reflects the great biblical vision where every tribe and tongue and people and nation are gathered together and our ministry looks like the communities it serves. Diversity of age and colour and ethnicity is never for us simply a matter of inclusion: it is a biblical imperative, and it is the means whereby we will be best able to evangelise our nation and find the very best ways forward for all voices to be heard. The Church of England is called to be the church for all people in all places. We believe that if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.'

This powerful vision is of a church where everyone can express their views, their beliefs, their hopes and their fears. As a Commission we encouraged children, young people and adults to share with us their views, beliefs, hopes

³ Cottrell, S (2020) *A vision for the Church of England in the 2020s: Christ centred, Jesus shaped, simpler, humbler, bolder.*



and fears about the issues facing families and households today, and the ways in which we can all be supported to flourish. They spoke from the heart.

We encourage the Church of England, in partnership with other faiths, community organisations and government, to take a lead in modelling and promoting this reimagined society.

What we have learned

Our learning tells us that there are four key priorities for action:

- Address the societal issues of our time which limit people's ability to flourish
- Maximise the protective effect of family
- Make sure that loving relationships matter and are valued in everything we do

⁴ Respondent to the Call for Evidence Briefing Paper Fifteen.

- Ensure that every child has the best start in life

Addressing the societal challenges in our time

'I believe that if we took seriously the ideas of equality, social justice and universal kinship as elucidated in the Bible then we would be in a much better situation.'⁴

We have examined a number of societal challenges that make for hard reading. The coronavirus pandemic was difficult for many to endure, and the effects are still with us. We have become aware of deep-seated poverty, areas of considerable deprivation, and the choices increasing numbers of families and individuals are making between eating and heating during a cost of living crisis. We have witnessed the inequalities, insecurities and

discrimination which blight the lives of so many, and highlighted the risks and continuing stigma associated with mental health conditions, especially for young people. We have drawn attention to the extent of loneliness and isolation experienced by people of all ages and in all walks of life, living in all kinds of circumstances, including among the clergy, much of it exacerbated by the pandemic and the other challenges of our time.

As we conclude our work, we are witnessing thousands of people making dangerous journeys across the English Channel to claim asylum, anxiously watching a war in Ukraine, seeing the effects of climate change and extreme weather events across the globe, and being shown the devastation resulting from natural disasters and humanitarian crises in other parts of our world. In order to respond to all these challenges it requires a society which is compassionate, generous, caring, forgiving and kind. The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, reminds us in 'Dear England' that while the world

'is brimming with expectancy and elation ... there is also injustice and horror, and while those persist, joy would always be tempered by caution and concern.'⁵

At the launch of the Commission, the Archbishop of Canterbury reflected that:

'Many of us will have seen, even in places of enormous difficulty, war and business, civil strife or international strife, revolution and breakdown, immense poverty...that somehow households and families can give people a quality of life that still may not be great, but it is a lot better than that that is all around them.'⁶

Maximising the protective effect of family, friendship and belonging

Archbishop Justin's words speak to the protective effect of families, the need we each have for care and support at various times in our life:

'Feeling close to others is key for mental health.'⁷

Despite the societal challenges which surround us, we have learned of the kindness that exists in communities determined to meet the needs of people in all kinds of circumstances. We have learned that we all depend on others for friendship and support, to love and to feel that we are loved and can enjoy a sense of belonging. We have learned that in order to truly flourish:

'the human heart needs positive, stable, meaningful and sustainable relationships. Psychologists and sociologists alike suggest that we are born with an innate need and desire for belonging.'⁸

There are many occasions in the Bible when the need for companionship in life is emphasised. For example, in Genesis (2.18) God declares that 'it is not good for man to be alone'; in Hebrews 10 we read of the power of community to spur each other on and encourage love and good deeds.⁹

The Commission has seen at first hand the power of community at work in Newham, Birmingham, Bradford and Slough, where

'belonging brings meaning to life, boosts self-esteem, provides a sense of identity, offers moral support, allows us to feel safe and helps us make sense of the world around us.'¹⁰

We met a teenager in Newham who read to us her moving and deeply thoughtful story of her search for belonging and identity, for which

she had won a prize. As is so often the case, young people speak boldly from the heart about difficult and sensitive issues:

Extract from Cultural Conflict by Bakirathe Thirukmaran.

'How would you feel if you were torn between two countries, with no sense of belonging to either one? Well, that's the story of my life and many like me who are also Tamil descendants of parents displaced by the Sri Lankan Civil War... Will I ever be treated as a citizen in Sri Lanka when I go or will I continue to be treated as a tourist just like everyone else?

And what about my place in the UK? Going to a British school, I am almost prevented from wearing anything that reflects my heritage out of embarrassment, as other pupils point out how different I look when expressing my culture... I notice the strange glare that my own peers give me on the days when I wear sacred ash or a bindi to school because I need to sit an exam. It makes me feel like an outsider, unaccepted and unwelcome, as I am left feeling like I belong somewhere else but not knowing where ... Whilst the UK is a welcoming place full of a diverse range of cultures, one can't help but feel like a foreigner when people highlight how different you are.'¹¹

Identity and belonging are intensely intertwined and the feeling of being an outsider can be deeply distressing. Being 'different from' and 'other' can seriously diminish our wellbeing. By contrast, a sense of belonging enhances wellbeing. We need to understand what it means to be different. This is especially so for members of UK Minority Ethnic/Global Majority Heritage groups. Another young person spoke to us during our work. She read a poem she had written entitled 'Who I Am' during a visit to her school. She shared it in a room with other pupils from different classes and age groups, and a number of teachers. There was complete silence as she read, and the deep impact on everyone present was tangible. Her poem ends with the following words:¹²

'if we only thought more of others, Respect each other's opinions, Allow more equality, More understanding, More happiness, More kindness, If we showed more love for each other and ourselves. Maybe, just maybe, the world could be a better place.'

These very personal testimonies, which we were privileged to hear, should be a wake-up call for us all. They sum up the evidence we found in respect of the most pernicious social issues of our time. Feeling different, socially isolated and unequal can lead to deep loneliness, which in

⁵ Cottrell, S., (2021) *Dear England: finding hope, taking heart and changing the world*. Hodder and Stoughton

⁶ Archbishop of Canterbury, Presentation at the launch of the Commission, 16 March 2021

⁷ Nancy Hey, (2022) *What Works Wellbeing*. Communication with the Commission

⁸ Dickson, M., (2022) News | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ The full story can be found on the Commission website: Thirukumaran, B., *Cultural Conflict; Giving children and young people a voice on conflict event*. Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

¹² Adejumo, A., 'Who I Am', poem written and read by Adeshewa Adejumo to Commission members during a visit to Brune Park School, Gosport. The full poem is on the Commission website Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

turn can lead to mental health conditions. We are reminded of the rules given to Moses for the Israelites to observe. These included the need to be welcoming to those who are different/strangers in our midst:

‘Do not ill-treat foreigners who are living in your land. Treat them as you would a fellow-Israelite, and love them as you love yourselves. Remember that you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.’¹³

A sense of belonging helps us to thrive and enables us to manage the times when being alone and feeling lonely takes hold. Loneliness can affect all of us from time to time, whatever our circumstances. Belonging builds resilience. We have seen how support ‘bubbles’ reduced the loneliness and isolation of people living alone during the COVID-19 lockdowns. We all need helpmates if we are to thrive and experience wellbeing. For the young people we spoke to, family was central to their wellbeing. The protective effect was of paramount importance. We heard the testimony of another young person who spoke emotionally about her troubled family relationships, and who had found loving kindness and belonging while lodging with a Christian family before going to university. This family modelled the family love and stability she had been longing for and the experience undoubtedly improved her mental health and her self-esteem. She still experiences ups and downs, but the sense of belonging she discovered in a loving, protective family environment has given her a solid foundation from which to manage the ‘downs’ and delight in the ‘ups’.

Helen Keller,¹⁴ deaf and blind from the age of two, a staunch campaigner for disability rights and social justice, made a plea for us all to be

responsible for each other’s welfare. Her words remain salient today:

‘When indeed shall we learn that we are all related one to the other, that we are all members of one body? Until the spirit of love for our fellow men and women, regardless of race, colour or creed, shall fill the world, making real in our lives and our deeds the actuality of human brotherhood and sisterhood – until the great mass of people shall be filled with a sense of responsibility for each other’s welfare, social justice can never be attained.’

Our understanding of wellbeing has been significantly enhanced during the work of the Commission. The ONS defines wellbeing as ‘how we are doing, as individuals, communities and as a nation and how sustainable this is for the future’.¹⁵ The ONS data indicate that while measures of life satisfaction and happiness are increasing, measures of personal wellbeing are still below pre-coronavirus levels.

The Executive Director of *What Works Wellbeing*,¹⁶ in conversation with members of the Commission, argued that wellbeing should be a criterion in assessing policies. Nancy Hey told us that close relationships are the cornerstone of social capital, and wellbeing is essential to the public good and to the *Levelling Up* agenda. In her view, the protective effect of family is not always taken into account in policy-making, and the Church of England, other churches and faith communities have an important role to play in changing this. This view was echoed in our conversations with representatives from the *Reducing Parental Conflict Programme* in the Department for Work and Pensions, who indicated that wellbeing is increasingly recognised as an important

indicator of prosperity, and policies which promote wellbeing can contribute to families being able to flourish.

Relationships matter

At the beginning of this story, we celebrated the rich variety of traditions, belief systems and faiths in our multi-cultural society, and the considerable diversity in family structures and household living arrangements. We recognised very quickly that ‘family’ must be understood in the broadest possible terms, embracing a number of different kinds of structures and relationships. Nevertheless, to be regarded as ‘family’, whatever the shape and size, there must always be an identifiable set of qualities or values present, such as mutual care and support, kindness and, above all, love. We also learned that in order to flourish, we all need to:

- have our basic physiological needs met
- love and be loved
- belong and be connected to others
- feel safe and protected from harm
- care and be cared for
- forgive and be forgiven
- be nurtured, valued, respected, cherished and accepted for who we are

These requirements are true whether we live in a family group, with friends or alone. Without them we are likely to experience emotional poverty. We need to strive to help everyone attain these qualities in their everyday life. We all need relationships that are kind and caring.

With these requirements in mind, our journey took us to the heart of human relationships as we considered the role of marriage in society today. We considered the changes in the way in which couples choose to form a loving partnership and the falling number opting for a

Christian or religious wedding. We noted that while Jesus affirmed the biological family, he also denied it pride of place. Although Jesus declared marriage to be divinely instituted, he remained celibate and commanded his disciples to ‘leave father and mother and come and follow me’. He redefined the bonds of kinship, asking ‘who is my brother and sister, and mother?’¹⁷

While looking at relationships and family life we have been particularly exercised by the importance of understanding singleness, recognising that a growing number of people are living a single life either by choice or circumstance, and are not living within a family group, in a couple relationship, or with friends. We learned how hurtful it can be when some family forms are regarded as superior to others, and seem to suggest that being single is less desirable. The Commission is of the firm view that singleness must be valued and supported as a status of equal worth in the Church of England and in our society:

‘Singleness is not inferior to marriage, both are a gift. Our culture and the church can idolise romantic relationships and marriage, making those who aren’t in one feel inferior.’¹⁸

The Commission recognised that all the research makes clear that the quality of relationships is more important for wellbeing than family structure, and that the marriage narrative has undoubtedly changed while still being highly valued by many. Nevertheless, there is overwhelming agreement about the importance of stability and commitment, especially in our most intimate of relationships. However we live our lives, dependency on others is an inescapable dimension of what it means to be human. There is no doubt that strong, loving and enduring relationships

¹³ Leviticus, 19. 33–34 Good News Edition

¹⁴ Helen Keller (1880–1968)

¹⁵ ONS (2021) Measures of National Wellbeing Dashboard

¹⁶ Hey, N., (2022) *The Wellbeing State – a long-term approach to national resilience and wellbeing*; What Works Wellbeing

¹⁷ Williams, op.cit.

¹⁸ Contributor to the Call for Evidence. Briefing Thirteen op.cit.

support the protective effect of 'family'. When seemingly strong relationships flounder there is considerable sadness and disruption.

We have spoken with children and young people from different backgrounds in different parts of the country. We heard about the negative impacts of family conflict, young people's wish to be involved in decisions about their daily lives, and the distress they experience when they are unable to live within a loving family environment, or find themselves in a care system which needs reform. Rather than blaming children who get into trouble, become involved in gangs, crime and county lines activities, we learned that we should look more closely at their vulnerabilities and understand the drivers that lead them into undesirable, and often criminal, activities. By improving our understanding, we can find better ways to support them and their families.

Our conversations have led us to believe that we need a transformative vision of how we live in relationship with others. We should strive for a society in which stability and commitment are central to our expectations; where preparation for forming loving relationships is natural and normal; where we should take every opportunity to learn continuously about strengthening our relationships; and where seeking support and asking for help can be a sign of strength and not a sign of weakness. Rather than living in a society which is quick to judge, we should strive for one which understands and accepts that we can all be vulnerable, sees the best in each one of us rather than falling back on the use of negative stereotypes, and promotes an environment rooted in the mutuality of care. One contributor¹⁹ to our Call for Evidence referred specifically to how Jesus set numerous examples for this transformative vision:

'One key theological concept relating to human flourishing comes in the form of Christ's liberative action and his ministerial life and vision. John 10:10 summarises this principle well when Jesus says, 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.' This flourishing takes a spiritual dimension, but also a practical and physical one. In his life and work Jesus attended to the literal needs of those around him, feeding them, healing them, and creating relationships with him. Importantly, this revelation was relational and occurred in the form of a human being that became man and dwelled amongst us. Human flourishing exists in the context of relationships, those centred on flourishing and justice.'

The role for the Church of England

In seeking to understand the priorities for action, the Commission has been informed and strengthened throughout by an exploration of Christian theology, learning from Scripture and other faith traditions. We have witnessed the many small acts of kindness offered within faith communities, and the willingness of people from a wide variety of faith traditions to partner in the mission to find a common humanity in a troubled world. Supporting individuals and families to flourish unites us in a common task.

One of the aims of the Commission was to offer practical and deliverable ideas about how families and households can be enabled to flourish. In this report we mention the impressive work taking place in a number of churches and dioceses in the Church of England, many in partnership with other churches and faith groups. We became aware of many exciting

initiatives and projects which are already bringing together members of different faiths and none around the country, all supporting families and households to flourish – too many to mention individually.

There is consensus in our Call for Evidence that the Church of England has much to offer everyone whatever their circumstance, and should take a leading role in promoting the common good. The Commission has seen how churches can offer friendship, care for the vulnerable and marginalised, and provide safe places in which to welcome everyone. The messages we received illustrate well the role that the Church of England can play in supporting families and households to flourish:²⁰

Promoting grace:

'We need to recognise that family groups come in many forms, some of which may conflict with our value systems. However the overarching theme of the Christian faith is one of grace and so we meet people in whatever circumstances with acceptance and love. It is not our role to judge others, instead we point them to Christ and allow God to shape their lives and families.'

Sharing messages of hope:

'I think we have a strong message of hope that we can share with individuals, families and households of all shapes and sizes. One that does that in a way that includes rather than excludes and holds difference in the tension of those bonds of love.'²¹

Promoting compassion:

'The Church of England should promote love and compassion. An environment where all are welcomed and can be supported – an open place where problems can be shared and mentoring support offered, and targeted support signposted.'

Respecting difference:

'The most important [way to support families] is that the church reflects the current diversity of society, is respectful of this and affirming of the diversity.'

Supporting relational capability:

'Proactively equipping people with fundamental relationship skills as a key part of personal and professional development across society must become a strategic priority to help address the costs and challenges of relationship breakdown and create a healthier society. This includes learning fundamentals like how to understand differences; use conflict to strengthen rather than damage the relationship; have tough conversations around issues, core values and beliefs when necessary; apologise well and forgive; and intentionally invest in building warmth and emotional connection in the relationship to help equip couples to flourish.'

¹⁹ ibid

²⁰ Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Fifteen *Final Thoughts Helping families and households of all shapes and sizes and from different cultural backgrounds to flourish*. Briefing Papers 1 www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

²¹ All these messages can be found in Briefing 15 ibid

Strengthening relationships:

'Our religious beliefs remind us of God's love for us and for all people, and that inspires us to want to reach out and offer support to individuals and families of all types. They remind us that God values the significance of each person, he knows us by name, and counts the hair on our heads. God values relationships between us, including family relationships as we see through the Old Testament and the family life portrayed there, warts and all, into the New Testament where we see the beginning of the church as a community of believers dedicated to each other, Acts 2: 42ff, bringing together families, individuals and households into one community. This will lead us to provide support that strengthens relationships through reconciliation, teaching listening and communication skills, developing emotional intelligence and understanding of mental health.'

Holding families together:

'Christian belief can bring families together in a world which is hectic. Eat together, pray together, talk together.'

Protecting and advocating for children:

'My faith enables me to show kindness, care and love to children, do everything I can to protect them from harm and danger. Give them opportunities to express their feelings/views and listen to them. Advocate on their behalf for clean and healthy communities, advocate to eradicate child poverty and poor nutrition. Support safeguarding protocols for children and vulnerable young people.'

Providing stability:

'Faith, hope, charity. Kindness. Providing stability in turbulent times in a turbulent world.'

Offering support:

'By knowing God's love for ourselves we can share that and let it overflow into our family/household life and the lives of those around us. This can enable each of us to develop and thrive as the person God intended us to be. Supporting and helping each other through difficulties, putting others' needs first, and demonstrating and living out God's ministry that he has called us to, each in his/her own way.'

Providing resources:

'Meeting physical needs: offering food and clothing to those in need; providing warm spaces and somewhere to have a cup of tea and a friendly conversation.'

Reaching out:

'At the heart of the Christian faith is 'come to Jesus' and that should be our focus. But we can also show Jesus by going to places where people are. Church buildings are seen as irrelevant to so many unreached families and so the churches that thrive go out and support people where they are. We can be WITH people, not doing 'for' or 'at' people. We also need to have people from all different backgrounds shaping what is done in our communities. Awareness of culture, disability, trauma and mental health are so important in our community these days.'

Working together with other churches and faith groups:

'We could provide a coordinated response from faith groups to the support offered in the community. The preciousness of human life should be a value on which support is offered - the unconditional offer of love and acceptance not based on need or poverty but generously offered to everyone. No expectation to attend church on the basis of support offered - freely given, without an agenda.'

Preparing for a different future:

'The next generation's world is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate, and parents are struggling to know how to connect with their children and their world ... Churches have an important role to play in supporting parents to have those open, honest and meaningful conversations with each other and their children, to help grow and build stronger connections ... We need to listen to our children more - to honour their insights and questions and to recognise that children can positively influence the community and the moral and spiritual lives of adults.'

Promoting a strong vision of hope and opportunity: learning from a trilogy of Commissions

Our Commission is the third Archbishops' Commission to report in the last two years. All three Commissions were inspired by Justin Welby's book *Reimagining Britain: Foundations for Hope*. The ultimate and overarching aim of all of them has been to reimagine a society in which

families and households can flourish. Together they promote a strong vision for transformative change.

The Archbishops' Commission on Housing, Church and Community

The first Commission on Housing, Church and Community had the ambitious remit of reimagining housing policy and practice in the light of a worrying crisis. Changes in family structures and more people living alone has resulted in much of the housing stock being unsuitable for twenty-first century needs. The Commission highlighted a shortage of affordable houses and a growing homelessness problem. The Housing Commission found that some people were having to make a choice between eating, heating and paying their rent. Our findings echo this reality. Moreover, the housing crisis has had a disproportionate impact on Global Majority Heritage households, who are more likely to experience housing deprivation. It also severely affects disabled people who account for almost half of all the households living in poverty.

The demand for more houses has put pressure on releasing more land for building. The crisis is not just about bricks and mortar, however. Archbishop Justin wrote of the need to ensure people are not only well housed but also for housing policy to be directed towards creating well-functioning communities. Strong community life is one of the building blocks of society.

The subsequent report, *Coming Home: tackling the housing crisis together*,²² provides a Christian vision for 'good' housing and positions the Church of England as a significant contributor to resolving the crisis. The Commission picked up on a long tradition of

²² *Coming Home*. op.cit.

church involvement in housing and put forward a positive vision and a comprehensive strategy for housing and the community. The Commission also argued, as we have done, that the social security system needs to be reviewed to reflect modern family life.

The *Coming Home* report highlights five core values that set a new standard and vision for what good housing should look like:

'A good home is a place that enables us to live in harmony with the natural environment, it is a place where we feel safe, it enables us to put down roots and belong to a community, it is a place we enjoy living in and which is a delight to come home to. In other words, homes should be: Sustainable; Safe; Stable; Sociable and Satisfying.'²³

To these five values a sixth was added: that of Sacrifice. It is a value that lies at the heart of the Christian story. Solving the housing crisis requires a willingness by everyone in the housing market, including the Church of England, to make a sacrifice and share in the burden of building affordable and suitable homes.

The Archbishops' Commission on Reimagining Care

The second Commission was tasked with developing a radical and inspiring vision for adult social care in England. In their report, *Care and Support Reimagined: A National Care Covenant for England*²⁴ the Commission indicates that:

'Longer lives and medical advances mean that social care has become a universal need, no longer confined to a minority of people who too often have been marginalised and invisible. Providing

care and support, and paying for it, should involve a shared responsibility across society.'

The report highlights the current uneven access to social care and the growing number of people who need it whether because of disability, ill-health, or ageing. At the same time, the changes in family structure, more families with all the adults working, and more people living alone, means that fewer families are able to offer appropriate care without considerable help. Moreover, the care system is described as complex, confusing and difficult to navigate.

The Commission has called for the development of a National Care Covenant as part of a roadmap towards social care and support becoming a universal entitlement. It has identified three main areas that need to change in order to reimagine better care and support:

1. Rethink attitudes to care and support: care and support should not simply focus on meeting people's basic needs, but rather enable everyone to flourish
2. Rebalance roles and responsibilities: the Commission called for the development of a National Care Covenant, to deal with the lack of clarity around care and support. A National Care Covenant should be introduced through a sustained programme of engagement and dialogue, in order to provide greater clarity about our mutual responsibilities as individuals, families and communities alongside national government.
3. Redesign the social care system: the Commission's long-term aspiration is that care and support should be a universal entitlement, available to anyone regardless of wealth or income.

All of these goals require sacrifice and investment. The Commission argues that: we will all need care and support at different times in our lives; the lack of care and support is an injustice; the provision of care must be inclusive, challenging ableism and ageism; care must flow from empathy; and promoting independence should be a positive goal of a revised social care system. The report also suggests that trust must be at the heart of the relationship between carers and cared for; and that our obligations to one another should be rooted in loving kindness.

The Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households

Each of the two previous Commissions has addressed a specific and serious social issue of our time, recognising that these issues impact the health and wellbeing of families and households. Our Commission, the third in the series, has taken a complementary but broader perspective, focusing on understanding how we live our lives in families and households today, and the society which surrounds us. Taken together, the findings, messages and recommendations of the three Commissions enable the Church of England to develop a hopeful vision for a reimagined society.

If the messages and recommendations of all three Commissions are implemented then we will indeed be able to reimagine a kinder, fairer society in which everyone is able to flourish. Moreover, we believe that the six values identified in *Coming Home* for the housing of the future can be equally applied to the vision for ensuring that everyone can flourish.

'To dwell safely and securely is not only a matter of bricks and mortar; it is about the quality of relationships within those four walls. Safety is at the heart of the principles and practices of safeguarding

- and the roles that churches, voluntary sector and statutory services have in shaping culture as well as following policy ... Safety, within the theological scope of scripture, makes possible the flourishing of individuals and networks of belonging between families and households. It includes the assurance of 'help-mates' and the teaching of children.'²⁵

Stability enables us to put down roots in order to invest in the wider community and receive support and appropriate care within it. Stability is essential for families, especially for children, whether it be within a family group or within the social care system. We have also emphasised the importance of relationships being sustainable. When a couple commit to a life together in marriage or otherwise, there is an expectation that this relationship and the commitment will be lifelong. Similarly in providing care, whether it be for children and young people or those who are disabled or elderly in our society, it must be sustainable, stable and safe. It must also focus on our mutual flourishing, ensuring that everyone is able to live the abundant life we are offered through Jesus Christ.

During the pandemic we saw how the inability to socialise caused severe upset and the possibility of depression resulting from isolation and loneliness. Sporting activities, spending time with friends, meeting at church, all encourage us to be sociable, to share time together with others. This is the essence of community which all three Commissions have drawn attention to and which we all wish to promote through relational, economic and social transformation in the way we live our lives.

Together, the three Commissions present a powerful promise of hope for a brighter future. With churches situated in every community, and Church of England schools located in all parts

²³ *ibid*, Executive Summary p7

²⁴ *Care and Support Reimagined: A National Care Covenant for England Final report of the Reimagining Care Commission* | www.churchofengland.org/about/archbishops-commissions/reimagining-care/final-report-reimagining-care-commission

²⁵ Gittoes, *op.cit.*

of the country, the opportunities are huge. To harness these opportunities well we need to promote cultural transformation, a change in attitude, and a new, positive narrative. We need a language which does not use harsh words or point the finger of blame, a language which does not dehumanise, but which promotes kindness and fairness, and seeks to unite, reduce divisions, respect differences and reconcile us to see the best in everyone and live in community with each other.

Love: the greatest gift of all

'We can cure physical diseases with medicine but the only cure for loneliness, despair and hopelessness is love. There are many in this world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love.'²⁶

We began by promising a story of hope and love. Time and time again, it is the word 'love' that has been used in our conversations, in our visits, and in the many contributions offered to our Commission. We were reminded many times that 'love is real' and if we dig beneath the surface 'we all deal in the common currency of love'.²⁷ When we say 'Love Matters' what do we mean?

In everyday life, we use the word 'love' in all kinds of ways. We say we 'love' ice cream or chocolate when we want to say how much we really like it. We love TV shows, films, games, in the same way. When someone says they love their football team they may well mean they are passionate supporters and spend a lot of money, time and emotional energy in following them through all their ups and downs.

But when we talk of love in this report, we have more in mind. We say we love our family

members; we love our friends. Here we mean that they are special people for us because both of what they give to us and what we want to give to them. We love them because we want the best for them, and we know they want the best for us. So we want to show them kindness, and they to us. We are willing to be patient with them, and them with us. We will forgive mistakes and hurts. This kind of love is regularly referred to throughout the report. The love of friendship, and the love of family can be very deep. Friendship lies at the heart of marriages that last.

We can mistake romantic feelings that are wonderful for true love. If we love a partner because of their looks only, or the way they make us feel, it may well be brilliant for a while, but it is unlikely to last. Looks fade. Feelings come and go. Love goes much deeper. The love we write about in this report is the love taught and exemplified by Jesus Christ. Jesus took the place of a common servant and washed his friends' feet. He told them this was the example that they were to follow with one another, and the world. Love that serves the needs of others at personal expense. When Jesus was put to death on a cross he chose to give up his life for others.

As the gospel writer John puts it, 'For God so loved the world that he gave up his only Son ... in order that the world might be saved through him'. Or again John wrote, 'By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for others.' Jesus did this not because we are nice, good people but because we are not in the right friendship relationship with God, and God wants us back. As the Apostle Paul put it, 'but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'

The love we write of is the depth of friendship and family love that we all want to find. But

it goes further, it is the love that is willing to give ourselves up for the sake of the very life of another. Hence why in the marriage vows made in a wedding each says to the other, 'for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health'. It is why each says to the other in a Christian wedding, 'all that I am I give to you, all that I have I share with you within the love of God'. We see this costly love lived out in the way parents care for children; the way a partner cares for their loved one with dementia; the way that the other comes first. We see it in the way members of our Armed Forces are willing to give up their lives for their colleagues and nation.

This love is not simply reserved for those close to us, or those we like. It is a love willing to care for the stranger, the unknown person, even the one who is an enemy. Love reaches out to all wanting the best for them. For at heart, love puts the other first. It always mirrors God's love for us. God always reaches out to us with forgiveness and new starts. Love hurts but, in the end, love wins.

Acknowledging that love is at the core of our vision, a contributor²⁸ to the Call for Evidence carefully articulated the key principles for families and households to flourish:

²⁸ See Briefing Paper

'The key principles for families and households to flourish are to love unconditionally with 1 Corinthians 13 4 – 7 as our standard. This means accepting and affirming each other, showing kindness and gentleness, being patient with each other, forgiving each other in humility (knowing we too need forgiveness), providing resources for needs and creating a haven of security for individuals to thrive and reach their potential spiritually, emotionally, physically, mentally and financially. Families and households are a microcosm of church and the wider society. Healthy families make up healthy communities and nations.'

The evidence gathered by this Commission wholeheartedly endorses these principles. By placing love, hope and faith at the heart of a reimagined society we can support everyone who is in need, including the less advantaged and marginalised, regardless of culture, creed or background. They can enable us all to flourish. Love Matters.

²⁶ Mother Teresa (1910–1997)

²⁷ Cottrell (2021) op.cit.p3



Image courtesy of the Centre for Ageing Better

Acknowledgements

Chairing the Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households has been a completely unexpected gift, a huge privilege and a great joy. My sincere thanks to Archbishop Justin and Archbishop Stephen for trusting me to lead a Commission which has taken us to the heart of the Christian story – a story of unconditional love. I have had the enormous pleasure of leading this Commission in partnership with the Bishop of Durham, Paul Butler, as my Co-Chair. We have talked at least weekly, sharing our thoughts, our plans and our learning. Thank you, Paul, for being by my side every step of the way.

Together with a wonderful group of talented Commission members and with the support of cheerful, dedicated colleagues at Lambeth and Bishopthorpe Palaces, we have explored many topics in the quest to understand how everyone can be supported to thrive, and to describe the kind of society in which we would like to live. Our discussions have been enlightening and hugely enjoyable. My deep thanks go to every member of the Commission team for your commitment and care.

During the last two years we have spent many hours in conversation with inspirational leaders from many different faiths, and dozens of kind, selfless people whose main aim in life is to help others to flourish. It would be impossible here to name everyone who has contributed so generously to the Commission. People from all walks of life and a wide variety of cultures have welcomed us into their communities and allowed us to spend precious moments learning about their everyday lives, the highs and the lows. We have been humbled by the honesty and openness of the many children and young people around the country who have been willing to share their dreams, aspirations and concerns. Their stories have been moving and occasionally painful to hear. We have seen amazing

organisations at work providing much-needed, generous support to individuals and families, often given in love by volunteers.

We offer our heartfelt thanks to everyone we met, all those who responded to our Calls for Evidence, those who wrote papers for the Commission (available on the Commission website for all to read), and many, many others who engaged in debates and round tables and provided expert advice. I have endeavoured to reflect faithfully in the Commission report – *Love Matters* – the wisdom and knowledge they all shared with us.

I hope that our report will inspire, encourage and challenge the Church of England, the Government and many others to take our recommendations forward. '*Love Matters*' tells a story of hope, opportunity and love. It invites us all to pause for a moment and remember that loving relationships are essential if we are to create a kinder, fairer, and more forgiving society. We have witnessed the deep and enduring power of community and interfaith collaboration. There is so much more we can do by working together.

We believe passionately that we all need loving relationships, that supporting every child and every family to thrive should be central to all government policies and to the work of the Church of England, and that love is the greatest gift of all.

I have learned a great deal in the last two years and am undoubtedly wiser and spiritually richer as a result. Thank you to everyone for teaching me so much.

May we always walk humbly, act kindly and value everyone we meet on life's journey.

Emeritus Professor Janet Walker OBE
April 2023

Appendix 1

Commission Members*



**Emeritus Professor
Janet Walker OBE**
Chair



**Rt Revd Paul Butler,
Bishop of Durham**
Co-Chair



**Professor Kwame
Akuffo OBE JP**



Dez Brown



David French



Revd Dr Julie Gittoes



**Esther
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Appendix 2

The Aims of the Families & Households Commission

The Aims of the Families & Households Commission were:

1. To articulate and address the pressures and challenges facing families and households, drawing on Christian theology and tradition, whilst also highlighting the good and the positive in terms of what works well and how that can be built on. Families and households were considered in the diverse variations in which they exist today.
2. To offer practical and deliverable ideas on what enables families and households of all shapes and sizes to flourish as the 'fundamental nuclei' or the cornerstones of every community in our society.
3. To make proposals to shape the trajectory of public policy relating to families and households across all government departments.
4. To look at what actions the Church of England could take, on its own or in partnership with others, to help support families and households, and to explore radical new pathways that contribute to family and human flourishing.

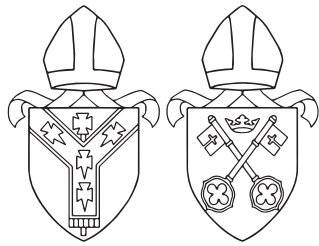
Workstreams

The Commission structured its work and allocated Commission members to specific work-streams focusing on key aspects of family life and household living arrangements, including the following:

1. The theology underpinning our understanding of family life and relationships – exploring the learning and relevant debates in Christian and other faith traditions that can guide policy-making.
2. The social history of families and households – exploring the diversity of family life and household composition, including singleness, lone-parent households, extended families and community living.
3. Children and young people – exploring how children and young people can flourish and meet their potential within stable, supportive loving homes.
4. Couple relationships – exploring ways to build and sustain strong couple relationships and the support needed to strengthen marriage and civil partnerships, and to reduce conflict in families and households.

Families and households are where children are nurtured in all cultures, and the quality of parenting is a critical determinant of the wellbeing of children and young people. Parenting practices shape their emotional, educational and health outcomes, and their ability to flourish and develop their own healthy relationships in adulthood. Because of the centrality of parenting in family life and within households, each of the work-streams considered parenting issues within their specific remit. These included variations in parenting and the roles played by mothers, fathers, grandparents and other kin, fictive kin, carers and others who have responsibility for raising and nurturing children and young people. Working with a wide range of individuals and organisations, the Commission sought to gather examples of good practice and has proposed innovative areas of action to further support the work the Church of England undertakes with families and households, and has offered proposals to shape the trajectory of public policy relating to families and households in a holistic way.





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