



Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households

Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Five

Couple Relationships: recognising, reducing and resolving conflict

The Call for Evidence

The Commission launched its Call for Evidence in October 2021 as the first major step in our inquiries. It provided an opportunity to engage with a wide range of people aged 18 and over, faith communities, and organisations working with children and families in England in thinking about some of the key issues relevant to the Commission's work. These are described in our first Briefing paper.¹

We are analysing the responses thematically and sharing the emerging themes through a number of discrete briefing papers. In reporting the emerging themes the Commission is not commenting on them at this stage, but simply sharing them with a wider audience while using them to inform our thinking and to guide the various Commission activities that are taking place to dive more deeply into the evidence.² The briefings we share may well spark additional conversations, which we would welcome.

About this Briefing

The Commission is examining the factors that promote strong relationships, stability, safety and sustainability within families and households and the conditions in which children can thrive and reach their full potential. The Commission explored a number of questions in the Call for Evidence to help us understand these factors. In Briefing Three we reported on the responses to questions about the role of marriage and the indicators of commitment in intimate couple relationships; and, in Briefing Four we reported on the answers to questions about the influences and challenges experienced by couples forming couple relationships today, and the ways in which the Church of England and other faith groups, the government and public policy can nurture and support these relationships to flourish.

In this briefing we look at the responses to two questions about the ways in which the Church of England and other faith groups, government and public policy could reduce

¹ *Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing One*, March 2022

² *ibid*



conflict in families and between intimate partners. Respondents to these questions were asked to provide examples of initiatives and programmes that are seeking to reduce couple and family conflict. We received information about a wide range of initiatives, programmes and organisations which the Commission is considering carefully as it undertakes further evidence-gathering activities.

In your experience or that of your organisation what can the Church of England and other faith groups do to reduce:

(i) couple conflict; (ii) family conflict

Context

Every family faces some stressful times when relationships within families can become strained. Over the past fifty years concerns have grown about the numbers of families in which the relationship between the partners breaks down, resulting in separation or divorce.

Until the twentieth century, divorce was largely the preserve of the rich, the clergy, and of men. While re-partnering and step-parenting were common in centuries past, the circumstances that led to these transitions were very different. Although today more marriages survive than end in divorce, large numbers of children experience the separation and divorce of their parents, the re-partnering of one or both parents, and multiple transitions in family living arrangements.

Research has shown that parental divorce increases the risk factors contributing to poor outcomes for children and young people, and it has become increasingly essential to understand the factors that promote positive child development and the ways in which children's best interests can be met when families split up.³ If a parental relationship cannot be repaired and if separation and/or divorce are inevitable, assisting parents to reduce

³ Misca, G and Smith, J (2014) *Mothers, fathers, families and child development* in Abela and Walker (Eds) op.cit.p151-165



conflict between them and maintain a positive co-parenting relationship is an important predictor of how well children and, indeed, their parents, can adjust.

One of the main concerns about the break-up of couple relationships, separation and divorce has been the potential detrimental impact of unresolved conflict on everyone concerned, especially children.⁴ 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 well-being and facilitating positive child development. This has become an important policy goal for successive governments in the UK.

In April 2022, the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020 came into force, introducing a 'no-fault' divorce registration system which is designed to reduce the potential for conflict between parents and encourage more conciliatory separation. The new legislation puts the emphasis very clearly on resolving parental conflict outside the courts. By not having to apportion blame, one party on the other, the expectation is that this will reduce the conflicts which currently 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 is looking at ways in which the divorce process will change and the impacts on children and their parents.

The Commission is also exploring other ways in which unhealthy conflict can be reduced and the role that the church and faith groups, as well as government and public policy initiatives, can play in this. In the answers to the questions in the Call for Evidence, the dominant theme to emerge was the importance of both preventative interventions and early intervention in reducing family and couple conflict.

Reducing and resolving conflict

Many respondents referred to the importance of raising awareness about family conflict:

- *What can be done depends on the cause of the conflict: spotting and recognising pinch points for example; housing and environment; employment/unemployment; poverty; education pastoral/spiritual care; relationship support; trauma support; mental health support*

⁴ Harold, G., and Leve, L.D., (2018) *Parents as partners: how the parental relationship affects children's psychological development*, t In Harold and Leve: *How couple relationships Shape our World: Clinical Practice, Research and Policy*



- *Raise awareness of issues that can cause conflict and work with groups that work to overcome these issues ... Then look at [how to] resolve the issues that cause these problems*
- *Talk about conflict more. Run courses and listening projects*

A number of responses referred to promoting early intervention for domestic abuse:

- *Offer and promote early intervention, mutual understanding, support and treating anyone - men, women and children who experience abuse - with empathy, understanding and a guiding hand - without escalation*

Preventing conflict - What can the Church do?

Many of the respondents to this question articulated the importance of the church doing whatever it can to prevent conflict between partners and in families, and suggested different things that the Church can do:

- *Normalise and encourage relationship education in all circumstances (not just when there are problems) and from an early age. Prevention and intervention are better (and less painful) than trying to fix deeper problems later. Encourage and offer a range of high quality resources and courses built on biblical principles. Offer free parenting courses, based on Biblical principles.*
- *If we [the Church] don't offer preventative methods, we will be fire-fighting all the time. i) couple conflict: 1- Educate before marriage 2- Try to identify the True Commitment of couples 3- Promote the "spirituality" of marriage as a God honoured sacrament. ii) family conflict: 1- Counselling and group talks based on Biblical stories of tolerance and peaceful conduct. 2- Befriending and follow up daily support*

A number of respondents focused on peace-making and teaching communication skills:

- *The church must surely introduce peace-making as a spiritual discipline, alongside all the others. Any good Christian should be exercising peace-making skills*
- *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. The Difference programme is excellent in teaching people how to practise disagreeing well and to develop reconciliation skills*



Being able to disagree well was a common theme and a skill that it was felt the church community can model within a non-judgemental culture:

- *For everyone both couples and families - Equip everyone to do relationships well as a natural part of spiritual and personal growth, including managing conflict as an inevitable part of life 2) provide training / courses for key life stages that puts pressure on couples and families – newly-wed / cohabiting, first child, birth of children, empty nesters 3) offer couples counselling and an easy to access / no shame support for troubled relationships 4) offer couple retreats and fun activities to positively invest in building strong relationships*
- *Listen without judging. Create a culture where it is safe to talk*
- *Show a good example of love in all walks of life*
- *Pray. Encourage, foster and model a climate of openness, honesty and grace. Be non-judgemental. Acknowledge that life is challenging and tough, that this doesn't mean people are broken beyond measure nor that their faith is inadequate. Fund and support respite care and holidays for those who are struggling*
- *The Church of England needs to do more in providing excellent relationship education resources which cover conflict resolution.*

Reducing conflict - What can the Church do?

Many respondents were equally committed to the Church helping to reduce conflict when it arises:

- *Be places where everyone is respected, and encourage & help to resolve conflict! Support families who are struggling, show by example that issues can be addressed and overcome and that family life can be healthier!*
- *Invite couples to the Marriage Course, where they can take stock of what is going on between them, and offer them counselling to help them ... Offer to listen to parents*
- *Support couples (including same sex) and offer counselling to families to work through difficulties and to find love and forgiveness*
- *Teach and demonstrate Christian values. Offer support and counselling where it is needed*



Some people pointed to the value of having more people in the Church trained in counselling:

- *Encourage training for more Christian counsellors*
- *Family and couples counselling can be really helpful but also being real about the challenges we face during sermons and services - shown that the Bible is a good guide to all we need*
- *Link up with existing secular organisations and find a way to offer counselling with a Christian context*

One respondent spoke about the counselling support they had received in their church when their relationship was in difficulty, and described how *'They listened to us and did not preach to us. They loved us for Jesus' sake'*.

Should the Church get involved?

The vast majority of those who answered this question expressed the view that the Church has an important role to play both in trying to prevent and to reduce family and couple conflict. A few, however, questioned the role of the Church in this regard and were firm in their view that the Church should not get involved, primarily because in their view it does not have the appropriate skills, or because faith itself can cause conflict in a family:

- *The Church of England is full of internal conflict, so I don't think it is best placed to get involved in couple or family conflict ... Faith and churchgoing ... can be a cause for couple conflict*
- *Leave people alone.*

A few others pointed to the stress that can fall on the clergy and that they too need support for their relationships.

Summary

The majority of respondents believe that the Church has a constructive role to play in teaching about conflict in relationships, thereby modelling ways to prevent conflict in the first place, and in supporting couples and families to deal with conflict in ways which minimise distress.



In your experience or that of your organisation what can government and the legal system do to reduce: (i) couple conflict? (ii) family conflict?

This second question focused on the role of government and public policy in reducing conflict. We received slightly fewer responses to this question than to the previous question. The main themes which emerged were that the Government needs to do more to support families in conflict and that the family law/legal system needs to do more to reduce conflict.

Some people pointed to the need for the Church to work more closely with government in addressing family conflict:

- *[Churches should] be more proactive in their engagement with government to help develop a deeper understanding of relationship dynamics, and work with sector professionals and the lived experience of faith communities in order to devise interventions compatible with faith and secular society norms*
- *[Churches should] lobby government and advocate for people without a voice*
- *Pressure government to fund social services properly; campaign against materialism and for a living wage*

What can the government do to reduce conflict?

Just as some people thought the church could do more to work with government, others suggested that the Government could do more through engagement with the church and faith communities, as well as the family justice system, to reduce conflict:

- *[Government should] be more proactive in their engagement with faith communities to help develop a deeper understanding of relationship dynamics, and work with judiciary and family courts and be innovative in devising legal instruments and interventions that strengthen family integrity, and implemented in a way that is fair for all...*



Other answers focused on a range of government policies related to family support and other aspects of family/public policy which could be introduced to reduce conflict:

- *[Government should] properly fund social services and the legal system*
- *Legislate against the culture / practices of working long hours, which has negative impact on family's quality time. Introduction of flexible working hours and job sharing. Legislate against abusive behaviours (physical and mental).*
- *Support families and couples financially and give financial backing to important counselling services like 'Relate'*
- *[Government should provide] funding for support groups and counselling and free legal help*
- *Create better family support systems and especially within schools/colleges, that children and young people can get the support that they need*

A number of responses focused on the difficulties created by poverty and inequalities in society:

- *Much conflict comes down to money. Poverty is still a huge problem*
- *Universal Basic Income - address poverty*
- *Reduce material stress*
- *Create a world with less inequality*
- *Support the material security of families in a rapidly changing world - universal basic income instead of benefits?*

Many of these responses highlighted concerns about the rising cost of living, housing costs and child care costs, all of which are thought to increase pressures in families and lead to more conflict between parents and partners. Some people referred to the stresses of caring for disabled family members, those with poor health, and families with no employment and



living on benefits. The call is for better government support for the least well-off in society and the most vulnerable:

- *Provide adequate financial support for the vulnerable and poorly paid. Most conflict comes from not knowing how you are going to feed your family or keep the heating on*

What can the legal system do to reduce conflict?

The suggestions in respect of the legal system centred primarily on reducing conflict when parents separate, with a strong call for a more coordinated approach:

- *The government needs a strategy for separated families. The government needs to support involvement of both parents in childcare - couples where both parents are involved from day one have more in common, stay together longer, prioritise their relationship and that with their children over self-interest. The wider family then also are better placed to assist in couple or family conflict in a constructive way*

This respondent mentioned shared-parenting programmes in other countries such as Finland and Sweden where they believe separated parents collaborate well in the care of their children.

- *Separating couples need to be signposted at the earliest stage to view divorce and separation as a life change to be navigated a huge public education campaign will need to be spearheaded in order to show the public why conflict is so damaging, and how to avoid it*

A number of responses 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:

- *Learn and build on the evidence from the Reducing Parental Conflict Programme Family Conflict- Continue Supporting Families Programme*

Research suggests that programmes aimed at reducing parental conflict are essential to improve children's outcomes when parents split up and are unable to do so amicably.⁵

⁵ Harold, G., Acquah, D., Sellers, R., and Chowdry, H., (2016) *What works to enhance inter-parental relationships and improve outcomes for children,*



Summary

The responses to this question clearly suggested that more could be done to support families to reduce conflict. A theme emerging in many responses referred to the inequalities and poverty in society which cause stress for families and put pressure on relationships. There was a plea from a number of respondents for government to have a better understanding of how different policies impact on poverty and how policies themselves can cause tensions in families.

- *[Government should] gain an understanding of what causes these issues: are unfair systems and policies impacting and creating tensions in households? Understand where policy impacts on poverty*

Several responses suggested that counselling support should be funded by government so that it is easier and cheaper to access.

The following very detailed response put emphasis on the importance of government spearheading a public education campaign about the impacts of separation and divorce, and the importance of the church doing more to acknowledge this issue. It reflects the suggestions made by many respondents to the Call for Evidence:

- *There needs to be coordinated oversight by the government of provision for families who separate, with proper access for children and young people to see a child consultant and have their views heard. We need a public education campaign, that family breakdown is not a matter for law and justice, that children need their parents throughout childhood whether they are together, separated or divorced; that there are local services to support families in difficulty navigate the choppy waters of separation and help them find a peaceable way forward that puts their child's welfare first. Nothing less than a public education campaign will change society's thinking to a kinder, more peaceable understanding of 'family' when parents live apart. And churches need to speak up too and break their silence on this issue ... given that family breakdown is one of the biggest issues facing our society today. 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.*

Professor Janet Walker OBE
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