

This blog is written by a member of the independent Commission. These views do not necessarily represent the views of the Archbishops' or the Church of England.

The Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households is embarking on a wide and challenging agenda at a time when we are slowly emerging from a global pandemic that has touched all our lives.

Repeated periods of enforced social distancing, lockdown, and dramatic disruptions in daily life, have revealed the intense loneliness and isolation experienced by many people, irrespective of their living arrangements. COVID-19 has exposed the nation to individual loss and collective trauma, unprecedented since the Second World War, and drawn attention to the disparities and widespread inequalities which influence our individual ability to cope with crises and, ultimately, to flourish.

The grief experienced by many thousands of families, while intensely upsetting, nevertheless provides a timely opportunity for the Commission to re-imagine the kind of society in which we wish to live, re-evaluate what is important, reconsider our values, and carefully re-balance work and care so that healthy relationships are fostered, children and adults are protected and able to reach their full potential, diverse family structures and living arrangements are supported, and inequalities are eliminated.

As we begin our work we celebrate the rich variety of traditions, belief systems and faiths in our multi-cultural society, and acknowledge the considerable diversity in family structures and household living arrangements. As life expectancy has increased considerably, more adults and children spend long periods of their lives outside the 'conventional' family unit of married parents and their biological children. At the same time, greater choice in the making, breaking and remaking of intimate relationships provides opportunities for individual self-fulfilment, the ability to leave abusive relationships, the chance to form new family units and to raise children in a variety of family structures.

The challenges are to deepen our understanding of these immense social, cultural and economic changes that shape our lives today, review the foundational impact of the Christian faith on our ethics and values, establish the risk and protective factors that condition the wellbeing of children, adults and the communities in which we live, and assess the legacy of COVID-19. Only then can we determine the steps that need to be taken to develop innovative family-focused policies, and make inspiring, bold recommendations for better support and services that can enable all individuals and families to foster strong, stable loving environments for individual flourishing.

Research shows that the majority of people of all ages seek deep, lasting, committed and exclusive intimate relationships, family connectedness is highly valued, and good relationships are central to individual wellbeing in all aspects of our everyday lives. By looking through a relational lens and acknowledging a relational God who taught us the importance of friendship, humility and trust, the Commission will look for examples of best practice which enable us to create and sustain healthy relationships, manage conflict constructively, and give children and young people the confidence to pursue their dreams safely.

Our work will be underpinned by a careful exploration of Christian theology which my Co-Chair, The Rt Revd Paul Butler, will be reflecting on further in his blog next month. We will examine the social history of families and households, consider how we can build positive relationships across our diverse society, strengthen attachment opportunities for children and young people, and address demeaning inequalities and disadvantages. Our aim is to offer hope, challenge and practical recommendations to both the Church of England and the nation as a whole.

