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Read an edited transcript of the Archbishop of Canterbury's remarks at the launch of the Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households on 16th March 2021.

Archbishop Stephen Cottrell and I are both extremely grateful to all of the Commission members who have offered their time, and to Andrew Selous MP for indeed pushing over the last several years. I could not agree more that this is an incredibly important endeavour.

A few years ago, I wrote a book called “Reimagining Britain”, with a second edition coming out in April. In it as I started writing, I thought that I needed to write something about family and household, and the more I wrote that chapter, the more I realised how it overlapped with almost every other part of our lives. And that so many other areas that are major challenges to the future of our country, and of our society in this country, but actually widely around the world, link in to the health of households and families.

If we ask fundamental questions about the kind of society we want to be in 10 or 20 years’ time, questions that have been brought to the fore by what you might call this Beveridge moment, this extraordinary moment as we begin to see the possibility of emerging from the pandemic crisis into the long-term chronic phase. If you ask questions about that, people will talk about education, health, housing, the economy, the world around us, climate change and more. But they will talk about households and families.

Many of us will have seen, even in places of enormous difficulty, war, civil strife or international strife, revolution and breakdown, immense poverty around the world, that somehow households and families can give people a quality of life that may still not be great, but it is a lot better than that that is all around them.

When we want to try and develop a more hopeful future, we must look at households and families. So that’s why I am so delighted that we have got to this point and so grateful to the extraordinarily brilliant people who have undertaken to contribute to the Commission.

Ironically the COVID-19 pandemic has enforced both mutual care and isolation. We’re all aware of the way that generations have been separated, and that has reinforced in us the sense of the importance of household units even when they’re physically apart.

And as I wrote that chapter, in almost all circumstances of human life, the greatest source of hope and the main location of despair is found in the household and family. And I use the two terms more or less interchangeably and will continue to do so – so one includes reference to the other.

The structures of families range from the oppressive and abusive to the utterly liberating and healing. It is God’s plan that the household and family should both be a base community of society but should also be a place of holiness, fidelity, hospitality and love, because God is holy, faithful, welcoming and overflowing in love.

It is, as Catholic social teaching puts it, the family that is the fundamental nucleus of society. The church in microform. The training ground for generosity, for courage, community life, stability. I have lived in both a very unhappy family and a very happy one, and I’ve seen both the impacts

that they bring.

The family is the foundational intermediate institution in society. That is the institution that is between the state or the nation and the individual, and every human being necessarily belongs to a household and family in one or another. It addresses and challenges issues of care and isolation.

It's a gift of God in any society. Bearing burdens, supporting the vulnerable, stabilising those who believe themselves autonomous and successful, and those who feel themselves to be failures. And that is all true, but as a church and as societies, we have often gone wrong in that we have either had illusions about families and colluded in idolising them, or we have neglected them, and both of those have been a serious error.

Furthermore, within the church in England, the prevailing culture has often tended to protect the nuclear family at the extent of the extended family. Extended families are the most extraordinary groups, valuing many all equally and not treating individuals as a useful asset.

I remember my grandmother telling me that her aunt, who had been the youngest of 12 children and the youngest daughter (nine sons, three daughters), on her way to her wedding, the only thing that her father, the aunt's father, had said to her is, "Now who's going to look after the house?"

Extended families are not places of resource, though they are that incidentally, but they are the most extraordinary communities.

The Commission, therefore, has four broad aims, which will be finalised and confirmed once the full commission is appointed.

Firstly, to articulate and address the pressures and challenges facing families and households, highlighting the good and positive in terms of what works well and how that can be built on drawing on Christian tradition. Families and households will be considered in the enormously diverse variation in which they exist today in our society.

Secondly, to offer practical and deliverable ideas on what enables families and households to flourish as the fundamental nuclei or cornerstones of every community.

Thirdly, to make proposals to shape the trajectory of public policy across all government departments and fourthly, to propose areas for further action by the church of England offered to other churches and faith groups on ways to maximise their contributions to supporting all families and households, and to look afresh at what they are and at new pathways.

I said to Professor Jan Walker and to Bishop Paul when we met that I trust that, like the Housing Commission's report, Coming Home, which was published in February, and like the Reimagining Care Commission that launches in May, that the aim is that it is radical enough to keep us awake at night as we anticipate its publication.

In other words, that it challenges the church and our society with truth, with hope and with the need for courage. The familial household is the base unit of society. It is enormously powerful. It's changing shape incredibly rapidly – over the last ten years alone- and we cannot imagine what it's going to be like as we go through the fourth industrial revolution. All the change that that will bring to employment and everything else.

We've seen massive changes in the last year. We're aware of much more abuse within locked-in households. We're also aware of how families have reached out and cared and loved. We're aware of the cracks where the paper has been stripped off the covering. We're aware of sickness and tragedy but also hope and love in a new way. We have to reimagine what our families and households will look like into the future, and put these values at the centre of policy.

Thank you all who are here today. I know that the Commission will be engaging with you and with many others. I know that they will have the most exciting and unpredictable journey. I know they are an extraordinary bunch of people. I'm deeply grateful to them and very much look forward to this report coming at a crucial turning point in our life as a nation and as a society.

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