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Archbishop Stephen Cottrell welcomes the Commission to Bishopthorpe Palace.

The fourth and final full Commission meeting of 2021 took place in the beautiful city of York. On a cold day at the end of November, Commission members gathered at Bishopthorpe Palace, built in 1241 as the residence of the Archbishops of York.

The 98th Archbishop of York, the Most Reverend and Right Honourable Stephen Cottrell welcomed the Commission to the magnificent Great Hall, led us in prayer, engaged with our work during the morning and talked informally to Commissioners. We were invited to participate in the daily Eucharist service led by Archbishop Stephen in the chapel, the oldest part of the Palace, during our lunch break.

Archbishop Stephen set the tone for the day in his opening prayers and initial reflections on the work of the commission. He shared his own experience of being brought up in a truly loving home where he had never doubted just how deeply he was loved by his parents. Only as an adult had he realised how fortunate he had been, and had learned that such unconditional parental love can never be taken for granted.

His key message was that the greatest gift that one human being can give to another is the gift of affirmation. What is best in every day life are those places where love is given and received: it is in the family or household where love can best be given and received, despite the difficulties and challenges of everyday life. Archbishop Stephen reminded us that the Trinity shows God as a community of ever-giving, ever-receiving reciprocity and affirmation of love.

So what did we learn at the meeting?

As with all our Commission meetings we packed a lot into the day, with Commission members sharing with each other the work they had been doing since they met in September, and listening to presentations about some of the issues which are at the heart of our remit.

Marriage preparation

At an early breakfast meeting, a number of Commission members met with three members of the clergy working in different parishes in the York Diocese. We were keen to learn how they support couples who are planning to marry at a time when fewer couples are choosing a Christian wedding in the church.

Clergy are very aware that some couples opt for a church wedding because the church itself offers an attractive setting for photos, especially in rural areas, even though the couple may not have a connection to the church. Churches offer a sense of place for the serious step of getting married.

We heard that churches tend not to advertise marriage preparation since it is not a mandatory requirement to get married in an Anglican church, although it is strongly encouraged and ‘implied’. While some couples may not be keen to engage with marriage preparation initially, they often report that it had been useful after they have completed it.

We were told how important it is to welcome people into the church and work with them wherever they are in their relationship journey. This may be after they have been living together for some time and, for some couples, the trigger to get married is when they become parents and

are arranging the baptism of a baby. As an increasing number of couples with children approach the church to get married it becomes increasingly important to prepare the whole family for the wedding and remind them of the meaning and importance of marriage. In addition to talking about the wedding ceremony itself, all three ministers remind couples about the importance of each partner working on the relationship after the excitement of the wedding itself and the honeymoon is over, and how to build on the promises they have made to support each other.



When asked by Commission members how clergy respond to requests from same-sex couples who wish to have a Christian marriage, those responding indicated their belief that marriage preparation should be open to same sex couples exploring civil partnerships and marriage. It is hoped that the Living in Love and Faith (LLF) process will help the whole church find a way forward that includes all who hold differing views.

During the last 18 months the coronavirus pandemic has disrupted the usual patterns of and approaches to marriage preparation interventions, with personal contact being limited by lockdowns. Moreover, many weddings had to be postponed when churches were closed. Nevertheless, this has provided an opportunity for pastoral conversations and preparation for marriage to be undertaken with couples via video calls.

Looking to the future, one of the emerging challenges for the church is how to maintain contact with couples after they have been married in church in order to offer ongoing pastoral care and support. Finding innovative ways to stay connected with newly married couples is an increasing focus of local ministry.

The challenges facing low-income families

As part of its remit, the Commission is concerned with understanding the inequalities in society today and, in particular, the economic disparities amongst families and households. Commission members listened to a presentation from Peter Matejic, Deputy Director, Evidence and Impact at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) whose head office is based in York. He spoke about economic security and a flourishing family life; impacts of the pandemic on households with a low income; longer term trends; and areas of focus for change. JRF focuses its work on understanding the challenges facing low-income families, those experiencing the greatest economic insecurity. There are 4 million low income households with financial arrears and the JRF has looked at job poverty and people in poor quality jobs. Peter reported that 40% of in-work households cannot afford to buy enough food.



Archbishop Stephen Cottrell and Peter Matejic of JRF.

The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on low-income households: including an impact on poverty, debt overhang and an unequal recovery, and it has exacerbated existing inequalities between households. The evidence shows that stability rather than family structure is what

really matters for addressing poverty, and children raised in a secure, stable, loving family have a better chance to flourish. The pandemic has had the worst impact on people who have the least: the pandemic put greater pressure on workers already at higher risk of poverty.

Peter drew a distinction between a focus on an investment model of family life and a focus on a family stress model, which suggest different solutions. The investment model focuses on how family income, investment in goods and services such as a healthy diet, housing quality, books and educational resources, and extra-curricular activities, impact on children's outcomes. The family stress model focuses on how family income can lead to parental stress and parental depression, thereby impacting on parenting behaviours, including parental relationship conflict, all of which negatively impact on children's outcomes.

The conclusions being drawn from the data indicate that benefits are too low, the benefit cap is problematic, and child maintenance payments need to be increased. Coastal communities are especially deprived. Peter also referenced the importance of the new family hubs in providing a range of services, the need for high quality mental health services, flexible working and decent affordable homes. Benefits alone give limited protection. For example, 43% of families receiving Universal Credit are food insecure as compared with 8% of the general population; and over half of people in receipt of income-related benefits are in poverty. Benefit values have been falling for the last decade. Peter suggested that the policy focus should be on 'What makes family life easier?' and the reforms which would improve family life. This would include supporting parents and family life, improving parental leave and maternity/paternity pay, and ensuring access to high quality mental health services, in addition to driving good jobs, building decent affordable homes and strengthening social security.

Peter's presentation provided much food for thought as the Commission continues its work. Since we met in York, JRF has published its [annual report](#) on poverty in the UK (January 2022), which provides in-depth analysis of the issues highlighted by Peter in his presentation.

Progress since the September meeting

The members of the four Commission work streams reported on their learning so far with a key presentation from the theology work stream about the messages in the Bible about family life. This work is highlighted in a blog to be published in February. The Chair and Co-Chair reported on a number of meetings they had held with leaders of different faith groups and the very positive responses they have received for further engagement with the Commission, as well as offers to arrange webinars and round tables.

The findings from the Call for Evidence

The Call for Evidence was still open at the time of our meeting. The response has been excellent with individuals across a wide age range from 18 to 90 and a number of organisations answering the questions. People were asked to focus on the questions which were particularly relevant to them and their experience, and we are very positive that there will be a rich set of data in response to all of the questions following analysis

which began in December. We expect to share findings relating to the different work streams as the analysis is completed in the early months of 2022. The findings will also inform the development of the activities which will form a second Call for Evidence with young people in 2022. Rather than a large survey we envisage a number of activities including focus groups with children and young people, and online opportunities for teenagers to give their views.

Next Steps

Commission members left the meeting with the task of planning the evidence-gathering activities which they will be undertaking in respect of each of the work streams in the first half of 2022. These will be brought together at the next Commission meeting in February at Lambeth Palace.

Our day at Bishopthorpe Palace had been lively, informative and stimulating. It provided a perfect setting for focused thought and collegiality as we move forward with gathering evidence for the Commission. We look forward to a return visit to Bishopthorpe for our Commission meeting in July.

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