

Community, Childhood and Challenge

On a windy London day at the beginning of February, the Families & Household Commission met in the surroundings of the new Lambeth Palace Library. Yet to be officially opened because of the pandemic, the Library's main meeting room looks North over St Thomas's Hospital and across to the Palace of Westminster: West to Lambeth Palace and up the River Thames to Battersea Power Station with its cluster of new high-states of Southwark and Lambeth.



A fitting compass for a day in which the Commission heard from a variety of inspiring voices about community and religious life, how single people can find a sense of family, of belonging; positive childhoods at peril; and finally a direction of travel for the coming year. At the start of the meeting the Commission members recorded their thanks to Rosemary Nuamah Williams, who left her post in Lambeth Palace in December, for her tremendous support over the last year, and welcomed Katie Harrison, the Archbishop of Canterbury's Social & Public Affairs Adviser, who has joined us on our journey.

A real sense of community at Lambeth Palace

One little known fact is that Lambeth Palace is home to the Community of St Anselm ("CoSA"). Established by the current Archbishop of Canterbury, with his vision of creating an ecumenical, international community for young people to explore their vocation and serve in a community of prayer. This year is the seventh cohort of members who are aged between 20-35. There are two different ways of belonging: an immersive ten months spent living at Lambeth Palace; and for those who continue their daily lives, weekly meetings and retreats. Members experience a year of shared life and spiritual formation that will shape their future equipping them to live lives of integrity in every sector of society. The Dean of CoSA, Revd Simon Lewis, spoke about the importance of desire and choice. Over the last seven years, 170 young people have joined the community from some forty countries around the world. Commissioners heard testimonies from two current members of CoSA, one from Australia and the other from Canada. They spoke compellingly of the importance of being part of a community of people with a shared cultural identity and the idea of a 'found family', one in which people create family ties with people they are not related to, and where their actions affect the people around them. They also spoke about how welcome they found it to be able to explore big questions about life and faith in community with others.

The Rev Shannon Preston, who co-ordinates the CoSA alumni, spoke of how former participants have expressed the desire to find a committed group of young adults and peers. Many of the people who join CoSA want to find relationships of integrity, to think deeply about how to live faithful, relational lives. The church can sometimes be unhelpful, preparing you for marriage by seeking to "heal" your singleness. How can the church love single people well? Some CoSA alumni want to look for a way to commit to being single, which is different from living a consecrated life but asks the question: how can I live a single life and flourish by being connected to a church community?

Members of the Commission also heard from members of Chemin Neuf – from a Sister based at Lambeth Palace, and a couple who lead a Chemin Neuf community in Cornwall.

Chemin Neuf is called to be part of the Chaplaincy team at Lambeth Palace, ensuring that it is a welcoming space for everyone, and to be part of the team which runs CoSA. Chemin Neuf was born in the 1970s, a combination of Ignatian spirituality and the charismatic renewal. It is a diverse

community of men and women from different denominations and countries, with a large community in France, with a specific call to love, pray, and work for unity. In Chemin Neuf, people take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, all of which tie the members to one another in ‘family’ relationships. Through poverty, all resources are received from the community and, when in need, it is necessary to ask for help from others. Through chastity, there is a commitment, if unmarried, to staying single, which brings loneliness but also causes members to create bonds with their sisters and brothers through opening up to one another fostering reciprocal care. Through obedience, members of Chemin Neuf go where they are asked rather than choosing where they go. In Cornwall the aim of community life is to surround each household unit – married couples, children, single people, consecrated celibate, priests – in love and to encourage truth, transparency and trust in relationships.

A rich discussion ensued from hearing the CoSA and Chemin Neuf members talk about their experiences, and in particular how both communities think about single life in all of its diversity in a nuanced way. It is important to see households of all different kinds not as independent but as interdependent. The session ended with the two communities leading the members of the Commission in devotion and prayer.



Sleepwalking into crisis

The inspiring Chief Executive of Coram, Dr Carol Homden CBE, was the meeting’s keynote speaker. Carol was accompanied by Alan Read who liaises with parliamentarians on Coram’s behalf.

Coram has been providing better chances for children since 1739, and Carol has been overseeing their activities since 2007. Coram sits uniquely at the intersections that affect children’s lives: health, care, education, and the law.

In the UK, children continue to fall through the cracks in professional and social systems, with inappropriately varying practices; they are not heard, and are not included in decisions that impact their lives forever. Coram’s mission is to narrow the gap, ensure that every child has a fair

chance, a loving home, is heard in the decisions that matter, and are given skills for life no matter where they live. As Carol emphasised, children do not get their neurological development opportunity back. Once it is lost, it is lost.

Carol highlighted the current lack of potential adopters and foster carers; she talked of the postcode lottery impacting whether or not a child was adopted or fostered. She believes that as a society we need to face up to demographic changes, with a generation of foster carers retiring. She welcomed the government's levelling up agenda, but pointed out that we need to be levelling up for every child who experiences systemic disadvantage. It is not always evident that the child's welfare is paramount when it comes to family law.

We had a unique generational responsibility and opportunity even before Covid because of the failure to make progress for children over the last decade. The pandemic has compounded many challenges and requires a step change from all of us, including civil society and government. The terrible fact is that we have the first generation of children who may have a lifespan shorter than ours because of the impact of diabetes and poor health.

Carol spoke of the opportunities we each have to make a difference in the life of a child to ensure that children and young people are given the care they need and deserve. If these opportunities are not taken then, in Carol's view, the nation is sleepwalking into a crisis.



The way ahead

The voices of experience of community and childhood set a strong backdrop for the Commission's business part of the day. Members of the Commission spoke about their activities to date, identified some key themes and the synergy across the various work streams in order to plan further evidence-gathering activities for the months ahead. Our work is underpinned by the explorations of our theology and social history experts in support of those who are focused on examining the challenges faced by today's young people, families and households and the opportunities for change.

The Call for Evidence has provided rich insights to guide our work, and the Commission will be holding webinars, round tables and focus groups

as the next step. A deep dive exercise is taking place in a number of dioceses, and we are planning meetings with members of other faith communities. An exercise with Children and Young People to hear their thoughts on the responses received from adults will be rolled out after Easter.

Latest News

Commission Member David French has written a blog: [Measuring wellbeing as a policy instrument: why should the Commission be interested? | The Church of England](#)

Keeping in touch

The Commission is very grateful to everyone who contributed to the meeting at Lambeth Palace Library, and continues to welcome input into their work. Our next meeting will again be in London, on 22 March.

We can be contacted at: familiesandhouseholds@lambethpalace.org.uk

Source URL: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/archbishops-commissions/families-and-households/news/archbishops-commission-families-and-1>