Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households

Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Four

Couple Relationships: forming intimate couple relationships today - influences, challenges, and support

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, and in Briefing Three we reported on the responses to questions about the role of marriage and the indicators of commitment in intimate couple relationships. In this briefing we report on the answers to questions about the influences and challenges experienced by couples forming couple relationships, 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.

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[1] *Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing One*, March 2022
[2] ibid

Thinking about how couples today develop a romantic, intimate relationship, in your experience or that of your organisation, what are the main influences they experience?

Context

Family structures have always evolved and changed, but the period since the Second World War has experienced widespread shifts in patterns of family formation, living arrangements, parenting practices, social attitudes and public policy.[3] As we reported in Briefing Three, it is increasingly usual for a couple to move in together before making the commitment to enter into marriage or a civil partnership, and the more traditional expectations of courtship, followed by a period of engagement before getting married, have diminished.

One of the most significant changes impinging on partnerships, parenting and family life in the past 20 years has been the rapid development of electronic communication and the centrality of social media. Digital technology has dramatically changed working patterns and family relationships. Social networking is a central and ever-present feature in the lives of children, young people, and their parents. It changes the way in which relationships are formed and maintained, and these technological advances continue at an extraordinary rate.

With the considerable changes in family structures and the centrality of electronic communication in mind we asked respondents to the Call for Evidence to reflect on the main influences which shape how couples form and develop intimate partnerships today. The responses to this question were all very similar. Respondents suggested that the main influence is social media, closely followed by peer pressure. While some responses talked about the important influence of family, these were in the minority.

Social media and peer pressure

Young people today have grown up with easy 24/7 access to the internet, mobile phones, instant messaging, and the availability to form relationships online, including the use of dating apps. Responses to this question highlighted these technological advances as having had an enormous impact on the everyday lives of young people and noted the extent to which social media companies have developed a wide range of apps and programmes which

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[3] Walker, J and Abela, A (2014) Partnerships, Parenting and Protecting Children's Best Interests: implications for policy and practice in A. Abela and J. Walker (eds) op cit

influence how people develop an intimate relationship. When listing the key influences, answers such as the following were typical:

> *1. Advertising; 2. Online media; 3. Porn from a young age*

> *Contact via social media and the internet peer pressures*

Very many responses indicated that social media is viewed as a powerful factor which may not always be helpful in the way it influences relationships. The view was expressed by many that social media tends to increase peer pressure on young people to behave in ways that push them into intimate relationships at a young age:

> *The main influences are social media and friends. They tend to suggest that a romantic relationship is there to meet all your emotional needs, that you can find the ideal person if you keep looking … … Social media implies that the people most likely to have a good relationship are those who are physically attractive, successful, confident and outgoing. There is little input into the qualities you need to input into a relationship, such as honesty, care, and commitment.*

> *They [young people] are often influenced by the media culture and their peers, they are not encouraged to keep sex for marriage, necessarily to get married before having children or buying a home together … often the wrong things are prioritised. The single biggest influence is the social pressure to sleep together very early in a relationship and perhaps move in together earlier than they should. Going slow is countercultural …*

> *In theory, relationships can be developed with people anywhere in the world, the 'market' is quite big*

Reality and TV shows

An increase in reality and television shows that focus on couple relationships was highlighted as a key influence:

> *Love Island and other so called reality shows*

> *Soap operas are often bad; there are few supportive marriages and too many abusive relationships*

Dating Apps

There was recognition in the responses that increasing numbers of people use dating apps to find an 'ideal' partner:

➢ *Online dating- Tinder, Grindr, Bumble....*

➢ *Online dating apps designed for hook ups : social media and messages from the media about what's acceptable*

➢ *[The main influence is] internet dating*

More traditional influences

A number of respondents did not mention social media as the main influences on relationships but referred to what might be seen as more traditional influences:

➢ *Family background; shared interests; geography; meeting at university*

➢ *Meeting at work; having joint interests; living close by; attending the same church*

➢ *Seeing and experiencing healthy relationships, witnessing, and feeling love and kindness feeling connected and valued*

Summary

There was considerable consensus that social media is almost certainly the major influence on how couples form intimate relationships today. A number of respondents also referred to the negative influence of, and easy access to, pornography on young people.

Other responses mentioned the influence of family life on relationship formation. The following detailed response summed up the key themes emerging from the data:

➢ *Their [young people's] own experience growing up will influence them for good and bad. For example, 1. The effect of divorce on young people 2. Influence of media and social media set up unrealistic expectations and pressures e.g., only 'beautiful' people are worthy of love; marriage is about a lavish wedding, rather than a lifelong loving commitment. 3. Our culture portrays: sex = love. There are HUGE pressures for young people to be sexually active at a young age and outside of marriage. The porn industry has a far reaching and detrimental influence on ideas about relationship and sex. 4. A belief that conflict is the end of a relationship, when arguments and challenges are normal …*

Thinking about how couples today develop a romantic, intimate relationship, in your experience or that of your organisation, what are the main challenges they face?

Context

The changes in society associated with new household structures and modern family life have important consequences for families, all of whom have to navigate the various challenges and pressures to take advantage of the many opportunities that exist. All families experience a number of life events that create stress on couple relationships and can easily destabilise families and households. There is increased societal pressure on both partners in a family to contribute to the household income and for families to be economically self-sufficient. The move towards gender equality has seen a dramatic shift in working patterns and expectations in the home since World War Two. Today, men and women and both partners in a couple relationship are likely to seek meaningful employment outside the home.

The Commission needs to understand the challenges facing couples as they develop an intimate couple relationship in order to consider how these relationships can be nurtured and supported. The Call for Evidence responses to this question tended to mirror the answers to the previous question about the major influences on couple relationships. The vast majority of responses referred to various kinds of pressure.

The prevalence of social media and social pressure

Just as social media is regarded as a major influence on couple relationships, the impact of pressure from social media was mentioned by many people as a main challenge, along with peer and cultural pressures, for couples who are developing intimate relationships:

> ➢ *The single biggest challenge is how to deal with the social pressure to sleep together very early in a relationship and perhaps move in together earlier than they should*

> ➢ *Artificial online relationships shaped by social media*

> ➢ *A false representation of what makes for a happy or 'normal' life through social media, TV etc.*

Having unrealistic expectations of couple relationships

Clear views were expressed in many responses that social media and current cultural norms lead people to have unrealistic expectations about couple relationships which then frequently fail to materialise. These unrealistic expectations are regarded as presenting serious challenges for couples:

➤ *The negative influence created by the inflated celebrity lifestyle imagery that is pervasive in many media outlets. This causes unrealistic expectations*

➤ *Unrealistic expectations from media, from porn*

➤ *People's unrealistic expectations of the relationship*

Pressures from one's family

A few people commented on the challenges that families can present for couples:

➤ *Negative experiences and narratives of their parents' experiences, including multi-generational trauma*

➤ *Perceived expectations from family, friends and society*

A lack of commitment between the couple

Some respondents suggested that a lack of commitment presents serious challenges for couples in being able to sustain a relationship. The apparent lack of commitment was seen by some as the result of growing up in a family where there was a lack of commitment between the parents:

➤ *Absence of having lifelong commitment and unconditional love modelled to them [the couple].*

➤ *People's expectations of the relationship and lack of commitment to the relationship*

The lack of appropriate support and advice

A few responses referred to a lack of appropriate relationship support as a challenge, especially when relationships break down.

➢ *Lack of access to support for their relationship. Lack of understanding about how relationships work*

➢ *Poor preparation for relationships*

➢ *Conflicting advice on how to manage expectations and the inevitable challenges*

The pressures in everyday life

A few respondents referred to the everyday pressures of work and making enough money which limit the time couples have to spend quality time together. Two respondents referred to money and income worries as key challenges, and one respondent mentioned the lack of internet connection as a challenge for those wishing to access online dating:

➢ *[The main challenges are] the time to spend with each other with social media, full time work and family commitments taking up most of people's time. If the family has a disabled member or elderly member to care for, then the challenge for a couple of getting any time to spend on their relationship is huge*

These challenges can put a strain on relationships and test levels of commitment.

Summary

The main narrative in response to this question centres on the unrealistic expectations of what a couple relationship will be like, causing challenges when the reality is very different. To a large extent, respondents blamed social media and a lack of relationship preparation for these unrealistic expectations within a culture that they regard as not always valuing life-long commitment.

Thinking about adult couple relationships, in your experience or that of your organisation, how can the Church of England and other faith groups nurture and support them to flourish?

Context

The Call for Evidence, having asked people to identify the challenges for couples in building and sustaining committed intimate relationships, invited them to think about the ways in which, firstly, church and faith groups and, secondly, government and public policy could do more to support these relationships to flourish.

Since there is clear research evidence that strong, supportive family relationships are central to promoting the psychological, social, and economic well-being of adults and children living in all types of households, the Commission asked respondents to the Call for Evidence to provide examples of the kinds of initiatives and programmes which focus on supporting couples to build and sustain their relationship. A variety of materials, courses and organisations were suggested. These examples are being collated and will be examined as further evidence-gathering activities are undertaken.

The main themes emerging from the answers to this question focused on the responsibilities of the church and the support that can be offered. All but two respondents who indicated that the church has no role to play in supporting adult couple relationships and should not get involved in anyone's personal, private life, expressed their belief that the church has a clear responsibility to support people with their relationships.

The responsibility of the church

The following extracts illustrate what many respondents see as the church's responsibility to support couple relationships:

> ➢ *Faith leaders have a duty to proactively build a longer-term relationship with couples beyond congregational meetings. They have a duty to oversee the emotional and psychological health of couples and remind them of the sanctity of marriage and reflect on the core responsibilities that each of the pair has toward the other [and their family]. Faith institution can provide an environment that supports the family structure*

> ➤ *[The church should] train them [couples] in essential relationship skills as a key part of ongoing personal and spiritual growth*

One respondent suggested that:

> ➤ *The Church of England should consider reducing or eliminating wedding fees where one or both partners are in receipt of Universal Credit. This would encourage couples in low income groups to marry rather than choose the more unstable cohabitation route*

Offering relationship and marriage preparation and ongoing support

The majority of respondents talked about the importance of the church preparing couples for marriage and in ensuring that they support couples at various stages in their life journey:

> ➤ *Preparation for marriage should be a standard part of a vicar's pastoral care of a couple one-to-one*

> ➤ *[The church should] offer training in essential relationship skills as a key part of ongoing personal and spiritual growth; training /courses at key life stages - marriage /cohabitation, new parents, empty nesters; offer couple mentoring; offer counselling services for troubled couples; offer retreats …*

> ➤ *Providing teaching and support prior to marriage, throughout marriage or other partnerships*

> ➤ *[Provide] relationship support groups. Marriage prep courses and marriage enrichment*

Signposting to other organisations

Many of the responses referred to the Church's role in signposting couples to professional services, and some respondents suggested ways to do this:

> ➤ *We believe the Church can nurture and strengthen couple relationships through normalising couples support, for example courses and counselling. Amongst our partners, we have examples of fantastic organisations and charities with a vision to strengthen couples*

> ➢ *The Church of England could help a great deal by highlighting quality resources and courses, by positioning them practically for churches i.e. put resource details with links on a central website page with helpful descriptions including who they are for, how they can be used and costs). Contact all churches across the UK (and beyond) once a year with a 'newsletter' on marriage and relationships, including a directory or resources and courses ... encourage all churches to offer something to support marriage and relationships, either as an individual church or in collaboration with other churches in their community*

> ➢ *Offer support and signposting for couples experiencing difficulty, have some people trained in this area. More teaching offered on the area of couple/intimate relationships (whilst also being sensitive to those who are single)*

Offering local support through the church community

Some churches told us that they provide a range of relationship support activities themselves, including outreach work, in addition to marriage preparation:

> ➢ *The whole parish needs to be a support group and a listening ear. Individuals can also be a sounding board and a listener*

> ➢ *Having the faith community as an extended family for support and encouragement*

> ➢ *[The church can offer] pastoral visiting and support, as well as pre-marriage courses*

These answers reflect the idea that the church offers a different kind of family which can support people and help them to flourish. We noted in Briefing One that many people regard the church community as a second kind of family.

Valuing, welcoming and being inclusive

The importance of the church valuing couples in all kinds of relationships, welcoming them into the church and being open and inclusive, were messages that were dominant in many responses to this question:

> ➢ *Help people know that they are valued and help them to avoid feeling judged or inadequate*

> *Recognise and value committed relationships in all their forms and offer support when it is needed e.g., facilitation through difficult periods, practical support when needed*

> *Teaching about the importance of love and respect, supporting one another in sickness and in health, and this applies to those in LGBTQIA relationships too*

Summary

The respondents to this question included a wide range of relationship support materials and courses used by different church communities to support couple relationships. There was a clear sense that the church could do more to support couples, especially in recognising all kinds of couple relationships and being more welcoming and inclusive. The terms 'tolerance' and acceptance' were used frequently.

A number of people expressed the view that the Church could do more to recognise that relationships do not always work out and should be there to support families when this is a reality. There is a recognition in the Call for Evidence that while celebrating the importance of marriage there is a need to be realistic that most relationships struggle at times and some relationships do not survive the test of time. The view was expressed that the church should be able to support people through the hard times. Some people called for more emphasis on counselling and relationship support throughout the partnership and not just at the time of preparing for marriage:

> *It would be very helpful if the church and other faith groups could be real, and acknowledge that some relationships don't work out, and offer teaching and support to gather round the family in crisis, dial-down conflict, and see them peaceably on their way in a differently shaped family*

- *The absolute refusal by churches to acknowledge family breakdown leaves a void, into which all sorts of unhelpful and unhealthy attitudes take hold. The absence of teaching or pastoral guidance about the reality of relationship breakdown leaves the church as out of touch and irrelevant in our society where relationship breakdown is so prevalent and, when badly managed, so very harmful*

Others suggested that the Church should be more open and honest about a range of sensitive and difficult issues, including domestic abuse, and encourage couples to nurture and protect their relationship and resolve conflict. Some respondents expressed concern that difficult issues are not talked about openly.

Some younger respondents referred to the age profile of many congregations and said that they were in the minority as young couples in the church community, which results in a lack of understanding in the church community of the issues that they experience:

> *My husband and I are often the minority in church, as the only younger people. The issues that concern us aren't reflected in church (and we've just had to accept that), as the majority are older adults.*

Thinking about adult couple relationships, in your experience or that of your organisation, how can government and public policy nurture and support them to flourish?

The second part of this question asked people what they believe government and public policy can do to nurture and support relationships to flourish. The overall theme emerging from the responses was that government and public policy should be preventative, and should also focus on early intervention and not simply intervene when relationships break down. There is recognition that all relationships struggle at various times and that there should be support available during transitions in family life as well as if relationships end.

Providing preventative services and early intervention

The following responses are typical of those calling for better preventative and early intervention services.

> *There is a need for early intervention support for families - to stay together where that is possible AND to collaborate when staying together proves too difficult*

> *Prevention rather than crisis intervention funding - financial support for organisations helping relationships to flourish, working with churches would be a way of doing this*

Providing relationship education

A number of responses advocated relationship education as important to prepare young people for adult relationships

> *Encourage the teaching of relationship skills in schools, with a curriculum based on evidence-based research and underpinned by Biblical values. There are tools for relationships that you will not find elsewhere, particularly in the areas of conflict resolution, forgiveness, servant-heartedness and unconditional love. Signpost government organisations and councils to high quality resources…*

> *Perhaps the best place to start is in the schools with appropriate subjects on building and maintaining positive, loving, respectful and meaningful relationship through to transition to adulthood*

Providing support through key life stages

Research over recent decades has pointed to the pressure on relationships at key life transitions. [4] A key transition is having a baby, which can be a testing time for a couple, and another key transition is when children leave home. Several responses suggested that support should be available at these key transitions:

> *1)Equip everyone to do relationships well as a key part of personal and professional development so they choose better partners, have better conversations even through conflict and grow stronger together 2) offer additional courses / support at key life stages that challenge relationships as part of marriage / civil partnership registration, new housing benefit, new child etc. 3) create more family friendly policies to allow both parents to manage work life while being present and involved in family life*

> *Maintain a focus on the quality of the inter-parental relationship, particularly at points of transition. Supporting adult couple relationship through initiatives such as reducing parental conflict and increasing support to separating and separated parents*

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[4] See, for example: Walker, J., Barrett, H., Wilson, G., and Chang, Y-S.,(2010) op.cit.

Providing access to counselling support

A large number of respondents called for there to be free access to counselling and other therapeutic support. There was a call for government to regard this kind of support as critical for mental, physical, and emotional well-being:

> ➢ *Make access to support and guidance, counselling easier and funded*

> ➢ *Provide the funding that makes relationship support services accessible, both when couples become aware of their need for outside help and at times of pivotal change for them - such as when partners become parents, or when they decide to separate from each other. Father involvement programmes have demonstrated good returns for couple relationships in the USA, suggesting that not only parental leave but supporting co-parenting is a good investment*

> ➢ *Help support services to be more easily available when needed e.g., couple counselling, mediation - at lower cost for those who need it. Perhaps offering greater preparation for those who are going into a marriage/civil partnership/cohabitation e.g., an easily accessible online course of things to consider/discuss before making a long-term commitment.*

Policy initiatives

Some responses drew attention to potential government initiatives which could support couples to flourish. These included financial remedies and incentives and a greater recognition of the impact of family separation. There were several references to the DWP's Reducing Parental Conflict programme, for example, designed to address the impacts of family separation:

> ➢ *Take pressure off house prices and limit mortgage borrowing to deflate the housing market such that two incomes is not necessary to own or rent a property as a family.*

> ➢ *[Government could support relationships through] Housing policy, Taxation, Job retention*

> ➢ *Properly fund social services*

> ➢ *Stop penalising people on benefits if they decide to live together*

> ➢ *Improve the benefits system to protect family life and not make having a family the preserve of the wealthy only. Reform housing policy to make it actually possible for anyone under 40 to actually own a home*

> Ensure that policies support couples and enable them to flourish. Sometimes couples choose not to be married because government policy would disadvantage them: e.g. i) where it would affect a widow's pension & ii) where it would make inheritance to respective children more complex because of the presumption of sharing estates

Promoting marriage

A number of respondents were keen that the government should openly promote marriage as the best way for families to flourish, although there were some opposing views on this point:

> The government should consider reducing or eliminating wedding fees where one or both partners are in receipt of Universal Credit. This would encourage couples in low income groups to marry rather than choose the more unstable cohabitation route. The government should encourage participation in marriage preparation so that as many marriages as possible have strong foundations right from the start. This could be via a contemporary YouTube resource giving couples the basics of marriage preparation with a directory of course providers for those who wish to explore the subject in more depth. This YouTube resource should have a link on every local authority website.

> Promote marriage and financially support it.

> Affirm the importance and value of marriage

> Ensure that the Biblical ideal of marriage is recognised. This should be distinct alongside any other forms of relationship that the government choses to recognise in law. The Christian elements of marriage should be recognised as an act of faith, including protection of them from religious discrimination in law

> I am wary and suspicious of attempts to boost "marriage" or "family life" since they mostly try to impose a misplaced moralistic agenda. The best interventions will be about ensuring adequate income levels, good housing, proper health care, good employment opportunities etc. Relationships flourish when they are not subject to massive external pressures...

Recognising all kinds of relationships

Although there is evidence in many of the responses for the promotion of marriage, there are also responses that call for the recognition of all kinds of relationships:

➢ *Equality of legal rights for same sex relationships - recognise all relationships as valid*

➢ *All adult couple relationships should be treated equally!*

➢ *Remove the lock on C of E churches being allowed to marry any legal couple they wish to*

Summary

Responses to this question highlighted the importance of relationship education, relationship support and access to that support whenever it is needed. There were calls for marriage to be promoted in policy although not everyone agreed with this, and many were keen that all kinds of relationships should be equally supported. A few respondents felt that government should not get involved in supporting family relationships, regarding this a private, personal business. They were very much the minority.

Professor Janet Walker OBE
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