



Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households

Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Three

Couple Relationships: the role of marriage today and indicators of commitment

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 within families and households in order to highlight the steps that need to be taken to address serious issues such as abuse and neglect, and to prevent families fracturing to the extent that children lack the stability that protects their wellbeing and inhibits them from flourishing. The Commission seeks to determine the factors that promote stability, safety, and sustainability in family life and the conditions in which children can thrive and reach their full potential. The Commission is exploring a number of questions to help us understand these factors, including the following:

¹ *Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing One*, March 2022

² *ibid*



- What is the role of marriage today at a time in our history where there is greater choice than ever before about how to structure family life and adult couple relationships?
- How can constructive, satisfying relationships of all kinds be fostered and maintained?
- How can conflict between partners and in families be minimised?
- How can support for families and households in all aspects of daily life be strengthened?

In the Call for Evidence respondents were asked to think about these issues. This briefing reports on the responses to questions about the role of marriage today and the indicators of commitment in intimate couple relationships.

What is the role of marriage in today's society?

Context

In his book,³ which inspired this Commission, Archbishop Justin commented that:

‘Today’s society is faster, more complicated, more independent and more confused. Religious observance is far weaker, yet where it occurs, far more committed.’

The twenty-first century has witnessed a significant increase in the legal options for forming a couple relationship. As a result of changes in the law, all couples in the UK who wish to legalise their relationship, irrespective of their sexual orientation, have a choice as to whether to get married or enter a civil partnership. They also have the choice to remain in a cohabiting relationship with less social stigma than in the past for the couple themselves or their children.

Faith groups, however, have taken different positions about who is allowed to marry within their places of worship. Views amongst faith groups about homosexuality and about same-sex couples being allowed to marry, remain diverse and deeply debated. The Living in Love and Faith (LLF) consultation within the Church of England is currently examining Christian teaching and learning about identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage and is expected

³ Welby, J (2018) *Reimagining Britain: Foundations for Hope*, Bloomsbury p276



to report in 2023. The Commission on Families and Households is liaising closely with the LLF team and sharing the findings from our Call for Evidence and other evidence gathering activities in respect of the issues and dilemmas facing the church and impacting on families and households.

The law allows marriages to take place in a wide variety of venues and locations, thereby enabling a greater degree of choice than ever before about where and how to hold the solemn ceremonies of matrimony and civil partnership. Marriage ceremonies are no longer restricted to church buildings or registry offices. During the coronavirus pandemic and the accompanying restrictions, civil wedding ceremonies were permitted in open-air settings and this permission is set to continue beyond the pandemic. However, a Christian marriage service in the Church of England is still restricted to church buildings.

One result of the increased level of choice about where to hold a civil ceremony is that the number of couples marrying in church and opting for a Christian ceremony has been declining in recent years, causing concern that the role of marriage may be being devalued in an increasingly diverse society with less focus on traditional marriage ceremonies.

Given the societal acceptance of increased choice about the forming of adult couple relationships and the differing positions and attitudes within faith communities, the Commission sought to collect views about these sensitive and important issues in the Call for Evidence. The responses clearly reflect the different opinions about the role of marriage today including, on the one hand, a strong endorsement of the importance and centrality of marriage as it has been traditionally understood within family life and, on the other, a call for the Church of England to recognise the legitimacy of all kinds of couple relationships and to be more inclusive in its response.



Emerging themes

A number of clear themes emerge from the responses to the question about the role of marriage in today's society, and these are illustrated below.

1. Marriage as a stabilising force in society

A substantial number of responses talked about marriage as being a stabilising force for good:

- *Marriage is the stabilising force in society, the enduring symbol of commitment of two people to do life together. To date, this remains the most stable structure for family life.*
- *Marriage is the lifelong, stable place within which family life can take place. It is a model for children of unconditional love and commitment*

2. Marriage as the cornerstone, the foundation for family life

Alongside the expectation that marriage brings stability it was described by many respondents as the fundamental building block of society, a secure structure, providing the foundation for strong family life and the raising of children:

- *The role of marriage is to provide a nucleus from which the whole of society evolves. It is the FOUNDATION to fall back on when societies collapse*
- *Marriage provides a safe, supportive and loving foundation for life of a couple and for the upbringing of children, if any*

3. Marriage as central within a Christian framework of family life

A number of responses focused on the Christian meaning of marriage:

- *Marriage is a gift from God*
- *Within the church, marriage is a form of proclamation of the gospel - the union of Christ with his people - and it bears witness to that (which is one reason why it's precious)*
- *[Marriage is] the biblical, and therefore, the best framework for household life*



Among these responses we also see evidence of the belief that marriage should be confined to a relationship between one man and one woman:

- *I subscribe to a traditional Biblical view of marriage being between a man & a woman. While wanting to welcome everyone into church & treat everyone with love, dignity & compassion I can't change what the Bible teaches to please society*
- *I think that marriage is still the union of a man and a woman, however this has been rather influenced by secular, individualistic culture*

On the other hand, a significant number of respondents questioned this interpretation, thus illustrating the different opinions within, and the dilemma that faces the church:

- *Marriage is the union of two people, it is legally binding and not mutually exclusive to a man and a woman*
- *We will alienate more people who would like to enter into committed lifelong partnerships unless we recognise that loving partnerships are all valid, regardless of sexual orientation*

There is also considerable acknowledgment in the survey evidence that the formation of couple relationships has changed dramatically in recent years, and that many marriages these days do not survive the test of time. Respondents commented that, in their view, these changes do not undermine the value of marriage, and the focus should be on promoting the quality of strong couple relationships:

- *The obsession of many people in the Church with their form and model of "marriage" is becoming an increasing problem I think. There is something approaching idolatry about it, and this creates (yet another) needless gap that may prevent people coming to faith.*
- *Marriage can be key in promoting and sustaining stability and a commitment in a loving and mutually supportive relationship, although there are plenty of examples of non-married, committed relationships and single parent families which are strong, thriving, nurturing and supportive. Also plenty of examples where marriages are toxic and unhealthy.*
- *... whether the structure is a marriage or a committed cohabitation, it's the quality and commitment of the relationship that's important*



4. Marriage as a public expression of commitment

Some respondents pointed to the act of marriage as an important public demonstration of commitment:

- *Marriage is a public symbol of attachment and commitment for many people*
- *The act of marriage a clear decision by both parties, an agreed plan for the future, a mutual and unambiguous signal of intent, the removal of lingering doubt or ambiguity, the public declaration of commitment in front of family and friends, and the affirmation, social support and recognition of those family and friends. It's possible to have those ingredients in a cohabiting relationship. But you definitely get them if you marry*

Some respondents suggested that the public expression of commitment also offers other practical benefits, such as financial security, as the following comments illustrate:

- *[Marriage has] Pension, tax and inheritance rights*
- *Marriage creates financial stability for some with the bringing together of two wages, and increases the likelihood of buying a house*

Summary

In the responses to the question about the role of marriage today there is clear evidence of a variety of views. Marriage is generally regarded as an important building block for a stable society but respondents recognised that there are other structures which can achieve this:

- *[Marriage] is an essential part of society's structures and thus should be nurtured, encouraged and promoted, while recognising it is no longer the only way to express love and commitment. Marriage should provide the healthy environment and relationships for human flourishing - the couple's, their children and other friends and family who are drawn into their circle*
- *Marriage is the first building block of community life. Marriage models important values for society as a whole, primarily: commitment in good times and bad; and love that sacrifices needs of self for the good of the partner. It provides the security and unconditional love that individuals need to flourish*



- *Marriage enriches family connections and provides a household within a community and a powerful positive anchor for that community. The values and commitment taken when becoming married are a vital moral code and constituent part of a flourishing society and its future*

There is clear evidence in many of the responses that Christian marriage should be open to all, and equality in approach should be a key goal of the Church of England. Moreover, marriage is seen to embody core values which underpin committed couple relationships and stable family life. Our next question in the Call for Evidence asked specifically about these core values and the indicators of commitment.

What are the principal indicators of commitment in intimate couple relationships, including marriage, civil partnerships and cohabitation?

Context

The numbers of couple relationships that result in separation has caused concern for several decades. Stone⁴ described the move from a largely non-separating, non-divorcing society in England in the Middle Ages to the separating and divorcing society of the late twentieth century as the ‘most profound and far-reaching social change to have occurred in the last five hundred years.’⁵ In his view, a ‘gigantic moral, religious and legal revolution’⁶ made it possible to shift from a system of marriage terminated prematurely by death to a system of marriage terminated prematurely by choice.

There has been a growing body of research over several decades on the potentially negative impacts of separation and divorce for the couple themselves, their children and for wider society. Parental divorce increases the risk factors contributing to poor outcomes for children and young people, and it has become increasingly essential to understand the factors that promote positive child development and the ways in which children’s best interests can be met when families split up.⁷ Evidence from the UK and internationally has highlighted an unequivocal association between the break-up of relationships and adult ill-

⁴ Stone, L. (1977) *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*. P422 Weidenfield and Nicolson

⁵ Ibid p 422

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Misca, G and Smith, J (2014) *Mothers, fathers, families and child development* in Abela and Walker (Eds) op.cit.p151-165



health and mortality,⁸ and poorer mental health outcomes. Children are also more likely to experience negative health outcomes.⁹

In contrast, research has shown that children living in strong, stable families tend to enjoy the best health.¹⁰ The overriding conclusion from a range of research is that children thrive best when they are brought up in families characterised by predictable and consistent care, and such care is strongly associated with there being a stable and harmonious relationship between the parents.¹¹

In the light of the research evidence and concerns about a seeming lack of commitment to sustaining long-term partnerships, particularly in families with dependent children, an understanding of the factors which protect couple relationships and those which inhibit them is essential if the Commission is to recommend ways to promote long-term stable relationships and the flourishing of families and households.

In the Call for Evidence we wanted to understand what ‘commitment’ looks like and the indicators that exemplify it. By understanding these indicators, marriage and relationship preparation and support programmes might be better tailored to address these factors. A number of common themes have emerged from the data.

⁸ Coleman and Glenn,(2009) *When Couples Part: understanding the consequences for adults and children*, One Plus One;

⁹ Strohschein, L (2005), *Parental divorce and child mental health trajectories*, Journal of Marriage and the Family, vol 67 p 286-300

¹⁰ Rodgers, B, and Pryor, J (1998) *Divorce and Separation: the outcomes for children*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

¹¹ Coleman, J and Glenn, F (2009 op cit.; Harold, G., Acquah, D., Sellers, R., and Chowdry, H., (2016) *What works to enhance inter-parental relationships and improve outcomes for children*, DWP; Acquah, D., Sellers,R., Stock L., and Harold,G., (2017) *Inter-parental conflict and outcomes for children in the contexts of poverty and economic stress: implications aimed at improving outcomes for children* Early Intervention Foundation; Harold,G., and Leve, L,D., (2018) *Parents as partners: how the parental relationship affects children’s psychological development*, In G. Harold and L.D. Leve: *How couple relationships Shape our World: Clinical Practice, Research and Policy Perspectives* P25-55; Harold, G and Sellers R., (2018) *Annual research review: interparental conflict and youth psychopathology: an evidence review and practice focused update* Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines 59(4) 374-402; Thapar, A., Stewart-Brown, S., and Harold, G., (2021) *What has happened to children’s wellbeing in the UK?* The Lancet Psychiatry 8(1) 5-6



General indicators of commitment

There are consistent themes running through all the responses, summed up by the following replies which list a number of indicators of commitment:

- *Trust, respect, kindness, shared vision and aspiration*
- *Dedication. Show love, affection and loyalty. Have respect and appreciation. Be honest and trustworthy*
- *Love, faithfulness, respect, generosity*

‘Love’ is the indicator referenced the most, with ‘respect’ being the next most frequently mentioned. Mutuality is referred to as critical to ensuring that these indicators are a shared experience:

- *Mutual respect and care for one another*
- *Mutual respect, sexual faithfulness, living together, sharing a life and being part of a wider family or community*

The act of sharing

In addition to the general indicators above, respondents pointed to other factors that indicate commitment. The notion of ‘sharing’ emerged as a key factor for a couple who are building a committed life together. Respondents suggested that the act of sharing can be exemplified by sharing household tasks, sharing responsibilities in the home, and finding ways to support each other, financially, emotionally and, importantly, through the good times and the bad. A number of responses emphasised the need to show commitment whatever the circumstances and challenges within the relationship or in the family:

- *It can involve promises, it can involve sharing things, it can involve joint commitments. Ultimately it should be about what we can do for our partner...*
- *... shared goals, shared finances, shared house, shared bedroom, shared life*
- *Sharing good and bad*



Exclusivity

The exclusivity of a couple relationship within marriage, a civil partnership and in cohabitation, alongside fidelity and loyalty, were regarded by the majority of respondents to the Call for Evidence as key indicators of commitment;

- *Fidelity, integrity, chastity.*
- *Commitment to a long term monogamous relationship*
- *Sexual intimacy and faithfulness being cherished, talked about and encouraged*
- *Lifelong faith and commitment to love (a verb not a feeling)*

For some people this exclusivity is made obvious through the making of vows publicly:

- *Commitment is indicated by a couple making the public promises of marriage*

Understanding that relationships can be challenging

In their responses, many people pointed to the importance of being realistic about the challenges of sustaining a long-term committed, exclusive partnership, and the reality that relationships change over time. While the key indicators of commitment remain the same during the life-course, understanding the longer-term challenges is essential if couples are to be better supported.

Respondents suggested that this means acknowledging that relationships can be difficult, and that a loving relationship is not all ‘honey and roses’; recognising that a committed partnership ‘isn’t a fairy tale’; and supporting partners to work through the challenges that they will encounter over time, and to adapt to change. Respondents pointed out that if relationships are to be sustained, compromise is essential, as is the investment of time and resources in maintaining the relationship:

- *Awareness of changes that will come with time and exploration of limits and capabilities*
- *Investment...If each person is willing to invest the time, energy, and resources to make the relationship work long-term*
- *Being prepared to compromise and forgive*
- *Being prepared to work at difficulties, aiming for long term and exclusive commitment*



There were suggestions by some that the church could do more to talk about the challenges that arise and how couples can be prepared for them.

Acknowledging changes in society

In their answers to the question about the indicators of commitment, several respondents reflected on the changes that have taken place since the 1950s in the process of forming a committed relationship. Evidence shows that for most couples today, moving in and setting up home together marks an important step in the formation of a couple relationship even though the relationship may have no legal status. Many people enter marriage or a civil partnership having already experienced sexual relationships, and increasing numbers of children are born to cohabiting parents. Moreover, long-term cohabitation has increased substantially, not just as a prelude to marriage but as a lifestyle choice.¹²

A member of the clergy pointed out:

- *There has been a real shift in recent generations, and in ten years I haven't officiated at a wedding where a couple haven't lived together first, and in some cases already have children. I think it is important for the church to meet people where they are and not to judge them but affirm their commitment to each other.*

Other respondents suggested that there may be a potential advantage of couples living together, and maybe having children, before marriage. In their view, in these situations getting married might indicate an even greater commitment:

- *Buying a house together seems to come before marriage as a sign of commitment for most. Marriage is increasingly seen as the 'crown' on a relationship that has developed through various stages of commitment – cohabitation, mortgage, children, finally in some cases marriage. I don't think this is necessarily a bad thing – it could be framed as people taking marriage extremely seriously.*
- *Marriage represents the ultimate act of dedication ... So the key indicators of commitment boil down to joint decisions about the future, of which marriage is the ultimate expression.*

¹² Office for National Statistics (2017, November 8). *Families and Households 2017*



Summary

There is a very high level of consensus in the Call for Evidence about the indicators of commitment and these are seen to be relevant to all kinds of intimate couple relationships including cohabitation. This view was underlined in the following response:

- ***The factors are common across all of these forms (marriage, civil partnership and cohabitation): Love, trust, commitment, shared lives, shared values, engagement with each other and with others outside the relationship (both together and singly).***

This view has important implications for the ways in which couples are prepared for a long-term committed relationship and in the kind of teaching and support that can be provided by the church and the state at various stages of, and transitions in family life.

We note that in offering their views about the indicators of commitment, some respondents commented that because the Church of England does not regard all intimate couple relationships as having the same status, the level of commitment is not always understood or acknowledged in couples who choose not to marry. These respondents stressed that, in their view, this lack of understanding is unacceptable in today's society.

In the next Briefing we report on responses to questions about the influences and challenges facing couples who are forming an intimate couple relationship, and views about what the Church of England and other faith groups, government and public policy can do to nurture and support intimate couple relationships to flourish.

Professor Janet Walker OBE
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