



Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households

Themes Emerging from Call for Evidence: Briefing One Understanding the meaning of 'family'

Context

'In almost all circumstances of human life the greatest source of hope, and the main location of despair, is found in the family'¹

As the Archbishop of Canterbury recognised in his book², family life in England in the twenty-first century is fluid and diverse, and families today reflect the fundamental changes that have occurred in the way adults manage their personal relationships in the period since the Second World War. The Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households was established to articulate and address the pressures and challenges facing families and households in all their diversity, in England today. The aims are to offer practical and deliverable ideas about what enables families and households to flourish as the fundamental nuclei of every community in our society, and to consider what actions the Church of England, alone or in partnership, and the government could take to support families and households.

The Call for Evidence

The Commission launched its Call for Evidence in October 2021. This marked the first major step in our inquiries and provided an opportunity to engage with a wide range of people aged 18 and over, faith communities, and organisations working with young people and families, in thinking about some key issues relevant to the Commission's work:

- what Christian theology teaches us about relationships and family life
- the social history which helps us to understand the issues facing society in the twenty-first century
- issues relating to diversity and the raft of inequalities in society, and the research knowledge available about how these inequalities impact families and households
- factors which challenge children and young people and those which can assist them to flourish
- ways in which individuals, couples and families can be supported to develop safe, stable, and sustainable relationships and reduce conflict.

The Call for Evidence ended in mid-December. We received 391 detailed answers to a large number of questions. We did not set out to establish a representative sample of respondents to

¹ Welby, J (2018) *Reimagining Britain: Foundations for hope*. Bloomsbury p63

² *ibid*



the Call for Evidence, but to throw the invitation open to anyone who wished to participate. The aim was to capture a range of views and experiences to inform the Commission's thinking.

We did not expect anyone to answer all the questions in the survey, although some did, but invited people to focus on those aspects of family life that were most relevant to them or their organisation. Responses came from people across the life span from 18 to 90 years of age, members of a range of faith groups, and a number of organisations working with children, young people, and families. The people who responded were largely of White-British ethnic background (81%); 69% were female; 76% identified themselves as Christian, Church of England, with a further 15% describing themselves as 'other Christian'. A small number of responses came from other faith groups. In our ongoing evidence-gathering activities, we will hear from people from a range of ethnicities and different faith groups.

We are hugely grateful to everyone who took the time to provide their thoughts and examples of the ways in which families and households are being supported. The vast majority of people gave permission for their answers to be used and quoted directly in the analysis, but not everyone gave consent for their names to be shared. We offer our sincere thanks to all those who have agreed that we can use their answers and those who have offered to help the Commission further. The responses provide a very rich pool of ideas which the Commission will consider carefully over the coming months.

The responses are analysed thematically, and we intend to share the key findings through a number of discrete briefing papers as we work through the various questions. In reporting the emerging themes, we are not commenting on the findings, but simply sharing them with a wider audience while we use them to inform our thinking and to guide the various Commission activities that are taking place in 2022 to dive more deeply into the evidence. The briefings we share may well spark additional conversations, which we would welcome.

About this Briefing Paper

This is the first of a series of briefings in which we will share the themes emerging from the Call for Evidence. At the beginning of the survey, we asked people and organisations to answer two general questions. The first question asked them to share their understanding of what family means to them, recognising that everyone's experience of family life is personal and that experiences vary. The second question referred to the aim of the Commission to find ways to support individuals, families and households of all shapes and sizes to flourish, highlighting the good and the positive.

The answers to the general questions about the meaning of family and the characteristics of flourishing were many and varied, and the thematic analysis of the responses has highlighted different ways to think about how people define 'family' and the variety of indicators that constitute 'flourishing'. This first briefing presents the main themes emerging from the responses to the first of these two questions. A second briefing will follow with the themes



emerging from responses to the general question about flourishing. In order to illustrate the themes, we include direct extracts from survey responses, allowing them to speak for themselves, but without attributing them to specific individuals.

What does the term 'family' mean to you?

There were 362 responses to this question. While some reflected the traditional ONS³ definition of 'family', others gave a wider definition, shedding light on what they regard as the different characteristics and elements of family life. We give examples of these various responses in turn.

Family as understood by ONS

A number of people referred primarily to the ONS definition of family as those related to each other and living under the same roof, typified by the following responses:

- *People you live with*
- *Myself, my husband and two children*
- *The group of people living together under the same roof with me, those in my home*

Family which includes relatives and wider kin, whether or not they live together

Another group of survey respondents included a wider group of relatives in their understanding of 'family', not all of whom live together under the same roof. These responses referred primarily to intergenerational relationships but still tended to be restricted to the inclusion of blood relations and those connected through marriage and adult partnerships:

- *birth family; spouse, children and their spouses, grandchildren, great-grandchildren; nieces and nephews and their families; extended families e.g., in-laws of adult children*
- *My own family is, first of all, a stereotypical modern nuclear family: mum, dad, two kids*
 - *surrounded by a wider network (grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins), none of whom live near the nuclear family*

³ According to the ONS: **A family** is defined as a married, civil partnered or cohabiting couple with or without children, or a lone parent, with at least one child, who live at the same address. Children may be dependent or non-dependent. **Dependent children** are those aged under 16 living with at least one parent, or aged between 16 and 18 in full-time education, excluding all children who have a spouse, partner or child living in the household. **A household** is one person living alone, or a group of people, not necessarily related, living at the same address who share cooking facilities and share a living room, sitting room or dining area. A household can consist of a single family, more than one family, or no families in the case of a group of unrelated people



Family, which includes what families are expected to do

The majority of people who responded, however, went beyond definitions of blood relations to include descriptions of what is expected of the people who live together and the various components of family life. For the most part all these more traditional understandings of family described blood relations and close family members living together, providing care and support for each other

- *A family is a group of one or two parents and their children which work as one unit. They share love, help and supporting each other*
- *The core group of people at the place you call home, providing nurture and care for all your needs, typically having at least one parent or grandparent in charge, with one or more children present*

Family defined by 'closeness'

We received many responses referring to 'family' as being defined primarily by 'closeness'. These definitions were broader in their understanding of family, and respondents included people that they feel 'close' to, not necessarily blood relations, as what family means to them:

- *Those whom you trust and have close relationships with, not necessarily blood relatives and not requiring children to be a complete family*
- *People who are related to me in some way, and those who have formed a deeper meaningful relationship with me whether related or not*
- *Family for most children and young people is a dynamic concept which can include family members, friends, and pets*

Family as those connected by love

For very many people who answered this question, 'family' refers to people who are bound together by love and kindness. Love featured strongly in their answers and family was not necessarily defined by blood relationships. The following answers typify the responses that referred to the defining characteristic of love and belonging:

- *[Family means] A collection of people who share and care for each other, go out of their way to consider the others needs and put them first. I do not define family through blood, but through choice and love*
- *Family to me isn't necessarily based on blood, for me it's people who love, accept and journey through life with me*



- *[Family is] A group of people who support each other and grow together through love and commitment*
- *[Family is] A unit built on common experience and love which is open to inviting others in*
- *[Family means] Togetherness, love, care, kindness, and strength.*

Family as a safe place

Some people defined family primarily as being a place of safety, security, and acceptance:

- *[Family is] a unit where each individual belongs and can thrive and feel safe and nurtured*
- *Family means, a secure environment with the people I love and trust. Where I am accepted for who I am and NOT what I have. I am not judged but loved, supported, and given the help and encouragement to thrive and reached my full potential. Where I can be me...*
- *[Family is] A place of stability, caring and love. Where you are accepted for yourself. A place where you can give support to those you hold close to your heart. A place of spiritual support for all*

Family as a committed life-long place of safety and support

Some respondents went further with their understanding of safety and security, adding a time dimension. For some people, family denotes a sense of belonging and a life-long commitment to each other. Family also means caring and accepting people for who they are, indicating the feeling of 'being valued':

- *Belonging to a loving and life-long group who share in a sacrificial love for one another*
- *[Family means] A warm, loving, caring environment where I feel included and valued. A place and people who accept me as I am and will encourage me to explore life in all its diversity*
- *Family means those who are bound together by common set of shared circumstances and/or values, underpinned by love and respect*
- *Family means a group of people who love one another, respect each other and work to better the lives of everyone in the unit*



The importance of church family

A large number of respondents referred to their church family as another dimension of what family means to them. In other words, family is not exclusive to one specific group of relatives or friends, but can denote a different kind of 'family-ness' characterised by shared values and faith. Some people referred to the fact that they are single and pointed to what they regard as the limitations of the ONS definition of family. For many single people, it seems that their church family plays an important role in their life.

- *Church is a very important and genuine family where there's unity, acceptance & love reflecting the unity & love of the Trinity*
- *I understand family on two levels. One my blood family... and second, those who have become family to me through close connection in life - this is generally my church family*
- *[Family is] My biological family ... Then there is my church family, every bit as precious, infuriating, beloved and diverse as the people who share my DNA*
- *I have a church family, which I am connected to through my church. Family is not just about those who live in the same household, as a single person who lives on their own that definition is problematic*

The need to understand different kinds of family

The answers to this question often reminded the Commission to avoid making assumptions about what constitutes a family and about the dangers of a one-size-fits-all definition of the family. There are clear messages emerging about the limitations of a conventional/traditional definition of family, and the importance of thinking about singleness in today's society:

- *[Family is] not just spouse and children, which sadly is all the church seems to value*
- *My best friend and I consider ourselves family by choice*
- *As a single person the constant use of phrases like "hard-working families" often used by church leaders and politicians make me feel excluded and alienated*
- *'Family' can include those friends who support each other though living alone in different households*
- *Family is one of the ways God has given us to be community just as Godself is a community bound in love, so is family. I believe a contemporary understanding of family as a bounded unit is a barrier to wellbeing for all....*



Summary

The Call for Evidence has produced a rich tapestry of understanding about the meaning of 'family'. There is a clear recognition of family as a group of people connected by blood, some of whom live in the same household, while other relatives and wider kin live elsewhere. For some people their understanding of 'family' denotes a different set of relationships, maybe friends or work colleagues who are 'like family'. One such group mentioned by a large number of respondents is that of a church family. There is a recognition that it is possible to belong to more than one kind of 'family'.

What has emerged very clearly is the belief that the term 'family' denotes a set of qualities, a set of values that characterise 'family-ness'. First and foremost of these characteristics is love, but many people also talk about belonging, trust, being able to be oneself, mutual caring, openness, honesty, respect, safety and security as key qualities of 'family-ness'. In other words, the Call for Evidence reveals that 'family' refers to more than relatives, to more than the people who live in a household, and it encompasses what several people described as 'the building block of society'.

One answer captured many of the key themes in the following detailed response:

- *Family is a place to find personal and group identity and learn about ourselves; a place of belonging and unconditional love and acceptance where one can flourish and grow physically, emotionally and spiritually. It is a place to feel safe, have the freedom to grow and learn and make mistakes' We learn what love is - being securely connected to people as well as how to love others (1 Corinthians 13: 3-5 sums up key characteristics of love perfectly). We learn about trust, commitment and values. We also learn how to manage life when things go wrong by resolving conflict, offering and receiving forgiveness and taking steps towards reconciliation. Family is where we learn our place in the world; we make choices; experience boundaries, and learn consequences. For those with a religious faith, this is where life in relationship to God is modelled and 'caught'.*

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