



Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households

Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Two

Understanding the characteristics of individual and family flourishing

Context

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. The briefings we share may well spark additional conversations, which we would welcome.

About this Briefing

This is the second in a series of briefings sharing the themes emerging from the Call for Evidence. At the beginning of the Call for Evidence 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 themes from this question were shared in Briefing One.² The second question referred to the aim of the Commission as being to find ways to support individuals and families and households of all shapes and sizes to flourish, highlighting the good and the positive. This second briefing reports the key themes which emerged from the analysis of 350 responses to that question.

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.

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

² *ibid*



What do you consider to be the main characteristics of: (i) individual flourishing? (ii) family flourishing?

The term which has been used by the Archbishop of Canterbury to denote a sense of liberation and healing is ‘flourishing’. The Oxford English Dictionary defines flourishing as ‘the condition of being in blossom; thriving; prospering; successful; to be in one’s prime’. These conditions were reflected in the answers to the question in which respondents were asked to offer their views about the main characteristics of both individual flourishing and family flourishing.

The responses to this question tended to be both extremely detailed and extremely rich in content. We noted, however, that a few people questioned the use of the term ‘flourishing’:

- *I find the word 'flourishing' very clichéd, even old-fashioned and am surprised to find it used here*
- *I have not a clue what this is asking - there is too much jargon here. "Flourishing" is a particular CofE word, with "mutual flourishing" etc. used*

While these comments were very much in the minority and the vast majority of people gave fulsome answers, they nevertheless suggest that as the Commission completes its work it would be helpful to offer an understanding of the characteristics which the word ‘flourishing’ encompasses. In this regard the responses from the Call for Evidence provide a rich data source.

The importance of meeting basic human needs

While we asked people to differentiate between individual and family flourishing, and the majority of respondents did this, an overriding dominant theme emerged from all the answers: **in order for an individual and a family to flourish each individual’s basic needs must be met as a pre-requisite.**

Several answers included direct references to the seminal work in 1943 by American psychologist, Abraham Maslow, who proposed a hierarchy of needs³ and a classification system that reflected the universal needs of society. Maslow distinguished between deficiency needs (things necessary for survival) and growth needs (things that enable people to develop their full potential), and he believed that basic physiological needs must be met before higher-level growth needs, including self-actualisation, can be fulfilled. Maslow’s term ‘self-actualisation’ can be understood as ‘human and family flourishing’.

³ Maslow, A., (1943) *A Theory of Human Motivation*, Psychological Review 50(4), 370-396; Maslow, A., (1954) *Motivation and Personality*. Harper, New York.



Maslow used the terms physiological needs (air, water, food, sexual intimacy, sleep, clothes, and shelter); safety needs; belonging and love; social needs/esteem; and self-actualisation to describe the ways in which human motivations move from physiological needs towards the ultimate goal of what we can refer to as 'flourishing'. Although Maslow never drew a pyramid to demonstrate the progression from deficiency needs to growth needs, he described fundamental physiological needs as basic for survival. So, if a person is struggling to meet their physiological needs they are likely to find it very difficult to grow to their full potential, to achieve self-actualisation/flourishing.

The view that physiological needs must be met as a pre-requisite to being able to flourish individually and as a family was evident in the vast majority of the responses we received. There is a clear message running through the answers that it is vital for people to have:

- *enough money to have an acceptable standard of life, e.g., having enough food, warmth and housing*
- *basic needs met: home, food, clean water, warmth, love, education, support and resources, access to basic human rights (food, water, shelter, health services, education)*
- *security of home, food, and finance. Stability and predictability*
- *a life that is free from poverty*

While the vast majority of respondents went on to describe in detail the growth needs which can enable human flourishing, they pointed out that meeting fundamental basic needs remains relevant in today's society. Maslow's work has been challenged in recent years, with criticism that the needs Maslow described should not necessarily be seen as a hierarchy in which one set must be met before other higher needs can be met. Nevertheless, the belief that it is difficult to flourish unless basic physiological needs are met found resonance with the majority of respondents to the Call for Evidence.

Safety and Security

Maslow indicated that once basic physiological needs are met, safety needs take precedence. These needs include health, personal security, emotional security, and financial security. Recognition of the importance of these needs being met to enable people to flourish was evident within many responses. People told us that flourishing means:

- *having access to good health care and education. ... Freedom from abuse and threat*
- *feeling safe and secure, free from anxiety*



- *living without fear, access to health, education, food and housing*
- *having a sense of safety, significance and self-worth*
- *safety and security in a home where they are loved, cared for and nurtured to become all they can be*

Love and Social Belonging

The third level of human needs was described by Maslow as interpersonal, involving feelings of belongingness, being part of a social group with friendship, intimacy and affection, and the need for a loving environment in which individuals can develop and grow, and receive acceptance, respect, and love. Many people referred to love as essential in promoting personal security, which in turn promotes good mental health and wellbeing. There is a clear message in the responses that everyone needs to love and be loved, and in the absence of love, people may become lonely, isolated and suffer with poor mental health.

The importance of love and belonging as key characteristics of human flourishing were clearly articulated by a large number of respondents for whom flourishing' means:

- *allowing the person to feel loved and encouraged in all that they do and that they are valued for all that they are*
- *the ability to give and receive love, equity, and respect for all members, listening and responding with love and care to individual needs within the group*
- *having love and support, emotional stability, a caring loving family*
- *being secure, being wanted*
- *feeling valued, accepted & loved*

Characteristics of individual flourishing

The Call for Evidence asked people to distinguish between individual and family flourishing, although some felt that without one it is impossible to have the other. Nevertheless, some subtle difference emerged from the thematic analysis of the characteristics of individual flourishing and the characteristics of family flourishing. Looking first at the answers to individual flourishing, in addition to having one's basic needs met, growth needs featured strongly as important.



Reaching one's potential – the ability to grow

Very many responses about individual flourishing highlighted the centrality of being able to reach one's potential (self-actualisation), to be happy, have the confidence to know one's place in the world, and the ability to grow. This growth could include the desire for a partner, being a parent, and developing one's talents and abilities. Typical responses to the characteristics of individual flourishing were:

- *being confident of their place in the world, mentally, physically, and emotionally healthy, and able to be their authentic self in making a positive contribution to society*
- *being happy and content with their life and playing a full part in their family and community. Able to work to support their own wellbeing and gain sufficient income to support themselves and any dependents*
- *feeling supported and loved by key people in your life; having support to do the things you want or feel called to do, to take risks, to deal with challenges and set-backs. To have opportunities to achieve and use your gifts and abilities, to contribute, to feel connected with others, to have times of rest, fun and enjoyment. To have a sense of spiritual purpose and meaning.*

Discovering gifts and talents - creativity

Being able to discover one's gifts and talents and be creative were referred to by some people as important in reaching one's potential. So individual flourishing is described as being:

- *able to discover one's own gifts and talents combined with the inclination to use those gifts and talents for the good of one's family and community*
- *loved in a way that provides an opportunity and freedom to express fully one's gifts and abilities* **Relationships and growth**

The following responses elaborated on the themes above and drew attention to the importance of having good relationships in order to flourish. Individual flourishing means:

- *being loved and accepted. Being appreciated and acknowledged. Being provided for and protected from harm. Having camaraderie and community. Having someone to celebrate life's important moments with. Having practical and emotional needs met*
- *knowing that you are unique and that the role you play in society is important and that you have a contribution to make, and being nurtured and encouraged in that contribution. In order to flourish we need to experience and learn to communicate well, deal with conflict, serve one another and love unconditionally. This all leads to*



healthy growth of individuals and relationships. Individuals flourish when they have security in their close relationships and where they are loved unconditionally

Healthy development and wellbeing

Several answers also drew attention to a belief that healthy development is essential to individual flourishing:

- *having positive physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being; resilience; ability to build positive, long-lasting relationships; sense of autonomy and agency; living life with purpose and balance*
- *loving oneself, looking after your health (physical, mental, and spiritual), caring for your needs, being kind to yourself*
- *[having] a strong sense of wellbeing and autonomy; healthy relationships; feeling safe and secure, free from anxiety*

Having a purpose in life

Some responses mentioned the value of individuals having a purpose in life in order to flourish:

- *living a fulfilling life, with meaningful relationships, meaningful work, a purpose, a plan, and a hope for the future*
- *[having] a sense of purpose in work or voluntary work, interests and down time, individual goals or aims, sense of achievement in interests, sense of being part of community*
- *[having] meaning and purpose - in how you spend your time and energy. Opportunities for leisure, play, hobbies, things that bring joy and relaxation, as well as work (including care-giving/household management) and volunteering*

Faith and spirituality

Some responses to the Call for Evidence specifically included references to the importance of faith and spirituality in achieving self-actualisation. In his later life, Maslow re-examined his notion of self actualization and added self-transcendence or spiritual needs to sit alongside self-actualisation as the ultimate goal.⁴ He believed that these spiritual needs could be met on many levels but transcendence referred to the highest and most inclusive level of human consciousness, seeking a benefit beyond the purely personal which might include service to

⁴ Maslow, A (1969) *The farther reaches of human nature*. Journal of Transpersonal Psychology. 1 (1) 1-9; Maslow, A (1971) *The farther reaches of human nature* New York. Viking Press



others, pursuing the common good.⁵ The responses that talked specifically about the importance of faith suggested that individual flourishing is:

- *finding out about who you are as a person, what makes you, people helping to encourage you to seek what your passions are, what God has laid uniquely on your heart ... To let the individual be an individual. And to be loved for who they are and especially allowing them to know that God hates the sin and not them, and trying to not condemn any individual who is trying to flourish and may make mistakes along the way*
- *knowing their maker through the work of Jesus and by relationship with Him, encouraged to love God and love others as themselves*
- *being able to live life in security, peace, confidence and living out God's call on our lives*
- *as a Christian, to have a living faith and beyond this, sufficient material resources, good health, wellbeing, relationships including the faith community, work/ activity/ service, and opportunities to rest & be restored, all in order to live meaningfully in the world*
- *[having] a sense of belonging and a sense of being valued for who you are. Safe, accepting relationships. Sense of identity. Appropriate boundaries, connection with others, opportunity to express spirituality, courage and resilience*
- *being renewed in the image of Christ. It's living in the presence of God - consciously near to Him and He to us. Flourishing is being made holy and being sanctified (1 Cor 1:2); it's living in step with the Spirit and producing good fruit (Gal 5:22f); it's being refreshed as we draw near to others in security and love, being comforted & comforting (2 Cor 1); it's living with hope and in contentment (Phil 4)*

A few respondents commented that, in their view, individual flourishing is not taken seriously enough by the Church of England. For example:

- *individual flourishing is largely ignored by the church*
- *I live on my own. **Thinking about how single people flourish is important** too, and my gut feeling is that you [the church] spend far too little time thinking about that*

Characteristics of Family flourishing

In parallel with the responses about the characteristics of individual flourishing, those answering this question indicated that in order for families to flourish they first need to have

⁵ Koltko-Rivera, M.E. (2006) *Rediscovering the later version of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: self-transcendence and opportunities for theory, research and unification* Review of General Psychology 10 (4) 302-317



their basic physiological needs met. Many responses referred to meeting Maslow's hierarchy of needs as essential to family flourishing, with every level of need being met as equally important for families to flourish as for individuals. The following response was typical of very many:

- *family flourishing requires the basics of life to be attainable. Secure appropriate housing, employment, access to medical support, provision of healthy food, access to leisure activities that build the individual and the family up*

Differences and challenges

There were differences, however, in the way respondents described family flourishing compared with individual flourishing. While the specific characteristics of individual flourishing focus on the self, the ways in which everyone should be able to pursue their own goals and achieve personal happiness and fulfilment, family flourishing is primarily characterised by the individuals in a family working together to achieve mutual security, and a happy and fulfilled family life. Respondents recognised that in order for each individual and the family in which they live to flourish, there are usually tensions which have to be addressed. The following detailed response sums up the internal and external challenges that many respondents referred to:

- *the family is a multi-layered entity made up of individuals [who are] different in temperament, age, need, expectation capability etc. In order for each to flourish there are certain mutual interdependent 'transactional' behaviours, and contributions. The sacrifices made by members of the family unit to complement the efforts of others helps each layer to both nurture and draw support from one another. This creates an environment where individuals and families can flourish.*

This respondent went on to point to the external challenges for families:

- *Circumstances beyond the control of the family do impact the equilibrium of families. These can range from economic and housing challenges to changes in legislation and family-friendly policies. Negative societal attitudes towards people of faith and colour, health inequalities within minority communities, lack of attention to the needs of children and young people, disproportionate resourcing to address their support needs all serve to create certain types of barriers that cannot be dismantled easily and continue to impact life chances for generations to come.*

A number of people highlighted the need, in their view, for better support for families to manage these challenges:



- *providing appropriate support for individuals & families to help cope with the effects of such fluctuations is key to helping dismantle barriers and disrupt cycles of deprivation and disadvantage*
- *family flourishing is quite a tricky thing to pin down as in reality, for most people, it's held not only in tension but also differing opinions and experience of what family is and means to those who make up that unit*
- *family flourishing also means having the skills and commitment to overcome interpersonal conflict or external challenges together in a way that strengthens rather than damages the unit*

Nevertheless, respondents suggested that if family members can work together, they are able to overcome the internal challenges and their family can flourish:

- *family flourishing is where a family finds its potential by reaching together in harmony, in striving towards a sustainable equilibrium to reach potential both as individuals but also as a group.*
- *[family flourishing] means families who are attuned to each other's needs, feelings and wishes; who try to understand each other's perspectives rather than criticise or rush to judgement; who work through challenges and difficulties; where differences are valued rather than people feeling left behind or left out*
- *families must know that there are up & downs in relationships, but they can be worked through ... Learning that family dynamics change as the family grows & ages. Respect for each other. Supporting each other*
- *family flourishing- a family that is united and yet diverse in that it is comprises different roles and functions. This often delicate balance should be orientated towards the good of all the members of the family, allowing them to discover and use their God-given gifts and talents for the good of all*

Shared values and goals

To deal with internal tensions, respondents pointed to the importance of family members having shared values:

- *[family flourishing means] mutual support within the family unit that meets the need for security, significance and self-worth, including strong attachments and a sense of belonging. Shared culture, values and traditions*



- *we flourish as families when shared values and purpose are expressed and acted upon in a healthy way marked by a free commitment of individual members in which both the family unit and the individual members of it are able to flourish*
- *flourishing is when the family is growing; all parties within the family share the same values and are working towards the same goal; the family firmly stands united against external troubles*
- *a shared sense of fundamental values (dignity and respect of all, capacity, and willingness to accept differences in loving mutual respect)*

Loving relationships and mutual support

Many responses referred to the need for loving and supportive inter-personal relationships to enable family members to work together and the family to flourish:

- *a flourishing family is characterized by good, wholesome relationships. A strong marriage and good parenting which enables children to feel secure and develop well in all aspects of their character and physicality. A family flourishing can be seen in the way love is demonstrated and fun and laughter are in evidence*
- *flourishing describes a family unit characterised by strong caring relationships in which each individual is able to thrive while working together to provide a safe haven of love, security, and provision for each other*
- *a flourishing family is where relationships are loving and where all can grow spiritually, physically, psychologically, relationally*
- *family flourishing is the ability to nurture and protect children and vulnerable people within the family unit. The ability to maintain relationships through the good and the bad times, and for all members of the family to feel valued and protected. Being able to repair difficult situations.*

Being a team

Some responses talked about family members needing to be a team that works together for the good of the whole. Family flourishing for many people means:

- *being a 'team' - for each other - and wanting the best for each other/others to flourish.*
- *Consideration of others and compromise. Collaboration. Forgiveness. Willingness to invest in each other*



- *working with consideration for mutual empowerment, supporting each other with respect for individuality as members of a team*
- *to work as a team to support and uphold each other in love and enable each individual within the family to flourish as long as it is not at the expense of anyone else in the family.*

A few respondents highlighted the importance of teamwork between parents. One respondent wrote about the challenges for mothers to be able to flourish as individuals when the bulk of the caring responsibilities fall on them:

- *as a mother and a feminist, there needs to be a re-balancing of ideas in society around mothers, and families and caring for children. Until more men share in the child care, the impact this has on your career, earning potential and ability to work, means I cannot individually flourish. Families flourish when mothers and fathers are equally impacted by being a family. As a society we don't value caring for children or the sick and elderly properly, mainly because it was traditionally unseen, unpaid work done by women ... In short families can't fully flourish until women are allowed to flourish and fulfil their potential.*

Living in faith

Self-actualisation and transcendence were as evident in answers about family flourishing as in those about individual flourishing. Many people commented that family flourishing means:

- *being in a stable home which is filled with love and care, where each member contributes their own talents and the family unit is working together, under God, for a better future for all of the family members*
- *a family flourishes most when the individuals in it flourish - it is designed to reflect many of the characteristics of God such as love, loyalty, companionship, security, working together, faith, hope, etc...*
- *flourishing families have a bonded love for one another and a strong faith which they share together. It's having enough love, food, shelter, access to education and finance to live well*



Separated families

A few respondents referred to the specific challenges for separated families, with a focus on enabling children to flourish when they do not live with both of their parents. For example:

- *from the perspective of separated families 'flourishing' means the children having the freedom to enjoy meaningful relationships with both sides of their family*

This understanding of family flourishing chimes with other responses that talked specifically about the need for good communication and conflict resolution skills to maintain life-long commitment in relationships.

There was a recognition by some respondents that not all families are able to sustain this level of commitment and significant numbers of families split up. Good communication and the ability to resolve conflicts are regarded as even more essential factors for separated parents who are sharing the care of their children:

- *In order to flourish we need to experience and learn to communicate well, deal with conflict, serve one another and love unconditionally. This all leads to healthy growth of individuals and relationships. Individuals flourish when they have security in their close relationships and where they are loved unconditionally. ... Flourishing doesn't always mean that everything in life goes well, it may mean that as collective members, a family flourishes through good parenting and 'leadership' in difficult circumstances ... A flourishing family will be able to resolve conflict well.*

This respondent went on to say:

- *This happens best when a relationship is grounded in faith in Christ. As we, as individuals, experience God's unconditional love and forgiveness, we are able to express that to our family members. Grace is key - it offers security as family members know they are not expected to be perfect, that the love they receive is not conditional on their behaviour or achievement. Lifelong commitment within a couple also brings security ... When your family breaks down it undermines that security and can undermine your ability to trust/truly experience that security in future relationships. This lifelong commitment is often not the case and sometimes not possible, but it is the best scenario for people to flourish.*

Summary

The rich responses to our question about flourishing highlight vividly the various needs that should be fulfilled if individuals and families are to flourish, and describe in detail the characteristics of human flourishing. The key theme of meeting basic needs flowed through the Call for Evidence responses. One response talked about how individuals can be impoverished in



different ways: they can experience a poverty of resources, poverty of relationships, or poverty of identity. Fulfilling these needs entails human flourishing:

- *So, for example, a flourishing of resources would include a stable income, secure home, and the financial means to live a comfortable life. Flourishing in relationships would entail a strong sense of belonging within community, including in familial and social relationships. Flourishing in terms of identity would constitute the stable sense of self and self-worth that comes from the first two facets. Individual flourishing very much occurs in the context of relationships ... they are inseparable from each other*

This response demonstrates how flourishing can be promoted by tackling the different levels of poverty, and suggests that human relationships are essential to individual flourishing. Other answers in the Call for Evidence also suggest that promoting strong, stable relationships is a key element in flourishing. Within this, some respondents reminded us that it is vital to understand human flourishing in respect of people in all kinds of circumstances and relationships, including those who are single, those who live alone, and those within the LGBTQ+ community.

There were also recurring pleas amongst the answers for the church to value all kinds of couple relationship equally, enabling everyone to flourish spiritually.

There is clear recognition in the responses of the potential tensions between reaching one's potential as an individual and a family flourishing as a unit. Answers to our question suggest that retaining one's individual identity can be difficult within a family group and requires a range of skills, a sense of give and take, shared values and a mutuality of purpose. Nevertheless, the majority of people felt that it is possible for the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts:

- *Where a family is able to function in a way that enables each individual to flourish and be supportive of each other to achieve 'their best', the sum of the parts is often greater than the individual parts. A flourishing family will be able to meet more than their own family needs but also have capacity and gifts which they are able to offer to wider society. In order to achieve this, more than their basic needs have to be met*

Several respondents used the verb 'to cherish' to describe the ways in which flourishing can be promoted. Cherishing each other, cherishing the mutual support that families and friends can offer, cherishing shared values and cherishing one's faith within the community:

- *Family flourishing comes from (a) within - where all members are individually cherished as part of that family and (b) without - where a family is able to take part in a wider community, to be well accepted and able to serve and live together with others in that community while keeping the individual identity of the family*



The Call for Evidence responses prompt the Commission to consider what needs to change if flourishing is to be a reality for all. This requires the Commission to understand the impacts of homelessness and inadequate housing; the current increases in the cost of living; the inequalities, poverty, and discrimination in today's society; and the longer-term effects of the coronavirus pandemic on individuals and families.

The Commission is exploring all these issues.

Professor Janet Walker OBE
March 2022