



Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households

Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Fourteen

Learning from Christian and other faith traditions about how couples, parents and children can be supported to flourish

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 have analysed the responses thematically and have been sharing the emerging themes through a number of discrete briefing papers. In reporting the emerging themes the Commission has not commented on them at this stage, but simply shared them with a wider audience while using them to inform our thinking and to guide the various Commission activities that have been taking place to dive more deeply into the evidence.² We hope that the Briefings have encouraged further thought about some of the most pressing issues facing families and households today.

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. In previous Briefings we have reported on the main themes to emerge from questions relating to the meaning of family and the characteristics of human flourishing, family relationships today, the issues facing children and young people, the lived experiences of changes in family life, household patterns and living arrangements, and the inequalities in society.

Throughout the Call for Evidence we have explored how the church and other faith groups, as well as the government, are responding to the challenges experienced by households and families, including the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Theology is foundational to the work of the Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households and our work is underpinned by the teaching about relationships and family life within Christian theology,

¹ *Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing One - The meaning of family*, March 2022

² *ibid*



other faiths, and scriptures. We have been learning from different perspectives during the evidence-gathering activities.³

In our Call for Evidence, we asked a number of specific questions which focus on how Christian teaching and other faith traditions can inform and influence our understanding of family life and households in England and how they can be supported to flourish. We invited responses from members of all faith groups. In Briefing Thirteen we reported on the answers to questions about the learning from scriptures about how families and households, single people and friendships can be supported to flourish. In this Briefing we focus on the learning from Christian and faith traditions about how couples, parents and children can be supported to flourish.

When thinking about marriage and other intimate couple relationships, how does your faith or that of your organisation inform the support that can be offered to help them flourish?

The Commission is aware that the Church of England's 'Living in Love and Faith' process is considering sensitive and difficult questions about identity, sexuality, relationships, and marriage. The Commission on Families and Households has been liaising closely with the Living in Love and Faith team to ensure that we learn from each other as evidence is gathered. While we have not asked directly about sexuality and identity in order to consider how individuals and families can flourish in today's society, our Commission has invited evidence about support for marriage and intimate couple relationships.

In the responses to this question in our Call for Evidence about how faith informs the support that can be offered for marriage and intimate couple relationships, we noted a sharp divide between those that proffered the traditional view of marriage as being between one man and one woman for life and those who believe that other kinds of intimate relationships should be recognised and supported. We report on these varying views here.

Learning from the traditional Biblical understandings of marriage

A large number of responses included a traditional view of marriage. Many of these referenced the teaching in the Bible and some were extremely detailed:

- *Churches should offer marriage courses based on Scripture. Tim Keller's book *The Meaning of Marriage* unpacks how the Bible can help husbands and wives to understand their different roles - sermons should regularly highlight how Jesus' teachings on marriage are different to that of our society so that the congregation do*

³ See: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/archbishops-commissions/families-and-households/theology-papers>



not go astray - sermons should regularly highlight that marriage is no longer normal or common in our society, let alone getting married in a church - sermons should regularly highlight how many children are now born to parents who are unmarried and who are separated and who have multiple care-givers and the chaos this causes

- *Marriage (between a man and a woman) is the foundation of family life, in which children are born and nurtured and in which each member of the family, in good times and in bad, may find companionship and comfort, and grow to maturity in love. (Common Worship, Marriage Service). Most couples inherit an understanding of marriage given to them by the world in which they live today. Our faith teaches us that God is the author of marriage and the only perfect spouse in history*
- *From a Christian perspective, marriage is a sacred union, a natural unit of agreement that is powerful in the spiritual dimension and therefore under attack from the devil since the Garden of Eden ... Couple relationships form the bedrock of families which in turn form the bedrock of society. No surprises that couple/family relationship breakdown is the common thread through much of society's challenges around mental illness, homelessness, suicide, and poverty*
- *Marriages will only flourish if they are as God intended - an exclusive heterosexual relationship that is a life commitment*
- *Marriage is such a central part of the Christian faith - it sits at both ends of scripture; at the beginning we see that the man and the woman together are made in the image of God, and their first commandment is to flourish in procreation. At the other end is the great consummation - Christ, represented as a groom, and in particular the church, represented as a woman "prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband" (Rev 21). Here the significance is the marriage representing the good finish -Christ reconciling all things to himself. So marriage has deep theological resonance - it points to God himself and his purposes for creation*
- *God designed marriage as a committed and lifelong relationship between a man and a woman in which children are born and brought up according to the principles found in the Bible. Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4 - 7*
- *The ideal of marriage is a form of witness to the integrated health of human flourishing; a healthy marriage reflects union spiritually, emotionally, and physically. The correlation of this to the conception, birth, and care of children is a profound expression of the fruitfulness of that flourishing! The Christian faith informs, deepens, and broadens it. Firstly, it is deepened, spiritually. There is a correlation between the marriage relationship between husband and wife, and Christ and the Church. (In this way, each marriage is an inherent proclamation of the gospel, adding to the profundity and preciousness of matrimony). Marriage relationships speak, through their intimacy,*



something about the worship and devotion that Christ has towards his church, and we have towards Christ. Secondly, it is broadened, so that all can be encompassed and embraced by the "family of God", and be counted as "children of God", the fruitful flourishing of Christ with his church. How does this inform the support we offer? It speaks to the inherent value of intimate relationships (they are not just functional, they speak to something deeper). It also recognises the limits of them (none of us can be as perfect as Christ!)

- *Marriage is something that should be upheld and celebrated. It brings stability and permanence. However in a world and culture where many things are seen as disposable, couples who marry do need the support of people around when they get into difficulties in their relationship and help to break out of unhealthy patterns.*

Some people regard marriage as a 'gift' from God which should be celebrated:

- *Marriage is a gift of God in creation, given for the mutual flourishing of the couple*
- *Faith helps me to see the marriage as three, the couple and God*
- *Marriage is the bedrock to society. We need strong and secure marriages to enable a strong and secure society. Churches should be leading the way in celebrating and supporting marriage*

Looking for a broader understanding of romantic love

An equally large number of respondents offered a different more 'inclusive' view of marriage and intimate couple relationships. Many of these referred to the scriptures as enabling a broader understanding of how intimate couple relationships can be supported within the faith traditions:

- *The better we can understand ourselves and our fears and hurts, and how those drive our behaviours, the more open we can be to loving relationships*
- *Agape is the ground in which all other loves grow and, of which, all are other loves are, in some way a reflection, no matter how fragile the reflection may be. All intimacy has some hint of divinity and needs to be respected*
- *I teach our children that we are all equal in God's eyes and that families come in different shapes, sizes etc.*



- *[The church] is often judgmental and prohibits some relationships from flourishing. I find the marriage service difficult as it is layered with so many expectations and constructs about family which simply don't apply to those whose family set-up is challenging. More nuance and more formal recognition of different shaped families [is needed]*
- *Marriages don't always work out and what is more important are relationships of love, care, and respect. These can be between people in lots of different kinds of relationships and situations. This models something healthy for children about how to have relationships, of trust. Relationships where difficulties can be worked through. It is really important that children are in a context where the adults have non-toxic relationships. - Hostility, conflict, and tension - or relationships which are full of pretence where things that are swept under the carpet are stressful and disorientating situations for children, which cause extreme stress and undermine their ability to understand their own perceptions and relate honestly. Christian values of truth, love and justice apply here. This also echoes the "secure attachment" we can have as we lean on the profound and forgiving love of God*
- *I am a Christian and I believe that all people, genders, and sexualities are made in God's image and that as God's love is broader, deeper and multifaceted, so can our expressions of romantic love be. God wants us to live happy, fulfilled, empowered lives where we can be our true selves, the relationships we are able to have and develop I would like to think can contribute to this. Being loved and able to love should be something all people can and do experience. Sadly too often the Christian church has a very narrow-minded idea and approach to what relationships can and should look like that I believe can be harmful to people and reduce their personhood. The church needs to get over its awkwardness about talking about sex and sexuality. The church also needs to support single people more confidently and not just assume everyone wants or needs to get married and/or have children. Patriarchal teachings and assumptions are damaging and need to stop, the headship model of Christian family being the only way needs to stop. Marriage isn't for everyone and that is okay*
- *All people are equal in the eyes of God, we deserve to be equal partners in any relationship. Love can overcome so much and help us to understand one another.*
- *The benefits of being part of a loving relationship and supporting each other through life's challenges - marriage is less important than a strong positive relationship*
- *I consider all loving relationships to be equally valid, and I firmly believe that Jesus' example informs that*



- *In today's changing society conventional heterosexual couples are not the only option. All relationships should be modelled on love, respect and caring for all members of the family*

Several respondents referred to the constraints they feel in being able to acknowledge different kinds of intimate relationships within their church:

- *As an inclusive church we try to offer support to all people entering into long-term intimate relationships. This can be difficult due to the fact that we cannot allow same-sex couples to marry. Many same-sex couples feel the church (as an institution) does not want their relationship to flourish*
- *At present I feel there is too much baggage in Christianity around what marriage is and isn't. Actually, if we just focused on supporting two individuals committed to each other in the best way to faithfully undertake that (often tough) journey without placing restrictions or judgements on how (i.e. Purity Culture), we'd have a much healthier, enabling approach*
- *More could be done here. Same-sex marriage should be carried out in a place of worship if the couple wish to. I see nothing in the bible that prohibits this. Christian values are available to anyone who wishes to follow them. Love is love. ... the Christian church as an organisation is lagging behind on this. My parish priest is progressive but the organisation is not.*
- *My faith is that everyone has the ability to love and that this is expressed in various ways - we need to develop our understanding of this and seek a deeper conversation as to what scripture says about this and our understanding of it - we need to speak more openly about intimate couple relationships as this is often a taboo subject*
- *My faith leads me to be as supportive as possible of all people, in all kinds of relationships, and to seek to ensure all people are included and treated equally, and have the benefit of (for example) marriage to support their relationships*

Some people regard the inability to include and bless certain kinds of relationships as undermining the church's mission to support people and families, *thereby 'leaving people excluded and marginalised'*:

- *My faith tradition (Christian) often seems to struggle to support either any relationship that is struggling or considered controversial*



- *You can be a committed person of faith without feeling the need for marriage, just as much as you can desire that faith and marriage should exist in a different community, such as the LGBT community*

Making judgements

Not only did some respondents comment on the constraints they feel but also on the tendency of the church to be unhelpfully judgemental about different forms of couple relationships:

- *... marriage as a life-long commitment between one man and one woman is the dominant model, and can be seen in ways that imply automatic judgement for failure, exclude or instil feelings of guilt and inadequacy*
- *Churches that support the realities of marriages instead of holding up some perfect picture that we can never live up to is so important. Divorce, remarriage, same-sex marriage is part of our society and we should not exclude people from our faith by making them feel they are wrong, broken or failed. I feel very strongly that we have a huge burden we put on people to be perfect in some Christian places and when they look at their messy lives, think that Jesus is not for them*
- *My faith doesn't inform my support for couples in an intimate relationship and how they can flourish. That comes more from my understanding of people.*
- *... our Church of England stance on same-sex relationships is really hurting our ability to speak usefully about marriage and relationships. In my experience the church is seen as toxic in what it says about intimate relationships*
- *The Church of England does not support - in fact, it makes life very difficult - for intimate couple relationships where people are of the same sex. Even for male/female couples, the Church of England has little to say to married couples, especially younger adults. This is because we are a minority. It feels like talking about the needs and concerns of newly-weds or younger married couples isn't relevant in an organisation that is mostly comprised of older adults ... I don't think the Church of England can offer this type of support, especially if it excludes some couples on the basis of sexuality*
- *My understanding of my own faith informs me to love, help and respect everyone, without judgement - this is not necessarily the understanding of the faith tradition that I identify with.*



A number of responses expressed concern for couples who are experiencing separation and divorce and also domestic abuse. A few others spoke about their decision to leave a church which was regarded as being judgemental:

- *Our faith makes us passionate to help people going through a relationship breakdown - see Isaiah 61 "He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted". In our work with thousands of adults from faith and non-faith backgrounds, we rebuild people's self-confidence, the skills to communicate through a separation, learn about forgiveness and many other tools and skills to help them re-build their lives If the institution of the church could ... get behind supporting difficult and broken relationships more actively, the church would be seen as a much more loving institution and not as judgemental. Sadly, the UK probably sees the church as "not liking divorcees" and is probably actively judgemental against them, continuing the negative cycle*
- *I do not have a religious faith. I do not see religious organisations supporting intimate relationships, in fact I often see the fall out of a lack of acceptance, and a withdrawal of support around what does not fit their narrow view of acceptable relationships We see a lot of domestic violence and often we see pastors, or imams ... asking women to stay in abusive relationships. We see churches reject women who have become pregnant out of wedlock and this contributes to their homelessness and destitution. We see churches and faith groups failing to support those who have had to take difficult decisions around sex –work*

A few respondents gave very personal stories about the abusive behaviour they experienced within their marriage and the lack of support they received from faith groups who were more inclined to minimise the issue and react in a judgmental way. One person commented that:

- *There seems to be a higher value on marriage than there is on keeping children safe, or perhaps an assumption that a publicly good Christian man cannot behave destructively in private ... personally flourishing means not living under threat and in fear*

Recognising supportive values

Another theme to emerge from answers to this question was the importance of supportive values, especially love, underpinning all kinds of couple relationships:

- *Faithfulness and trust and exclusivity are all values that can help relationships to thrive*
- *Love is the thing that matters ... Love for all should mean for all relationships*



- *Love one another - forgive one another - stand against oppression and abuse value all loving relationships - this is difficult when same sex relationships cannot be blessed*
- *Important in all couple relationships should be tolerance, forgiveness, and acceptance. My faith tells me that these qualities are (or should be) at the heart of all couple relationships*
- *Faithfulness, covenant, life-long commitment, compassion, love, forgiveness, reconciliation. For all couples - not just opposite sex couples*
- *Love, forgiveness, and respect for the other*
- *Key supportive and empowering values: Respect equality support inclusion love compassion*
- *Any union of couples through marriage or otherwise, should be to enhance the concept of commitment to that person, to enable both to build a foundation of strength for both parties*
- *My faith tells me that marriage is special and committing to someone for the rest of your life is a sacred act, but also that it needs to be built on a foundation of respect. Love alone is not enough*
- *Respect is key: all are made in image of God and unique; this is the foundation for any relationship including same sex*

Offering practical support

Some of the responses contained references to the kinds of support which should be available for couples and their relationships. There was wide recognition that marriage is challenging and that most couples face hard times and some will benefit from professional support:

- *More education about the realities of marriage and how to survive it. Raise the age of marriage to 18 or above. Stamp out child marriage and polygamy and FGM. Promote Christian values and offer practical support. A lot of people who desperately need marriage guidance cannot afford the cost of the counselling or afford the time to use it*
- *Marriage counselling can be very expensive ... It would be amazing if the church could offer low-cost (but good quality) alternative*



- *From every angle, the spiritual, mental, emotional, physical, and financial wellbeing of our nation is directly linked to the level of support offered to marriages and intimate couple relationships. Every relationship faces hurdles and the more intimate the relationship the more emotionally charged the hurdles and the more vital it is that people are equipped to deal with them well. Success comes from being equipped ahead of time to get over the inevitable challenges so couples can have better conversations even through conflict situations, remain strong in their commitment and achieve better outcomes. Learning how to understand differences; use conflict to strengthen rather than damage the relationship; have tough conversations around key issues, core values and beliefs when necessary; apologise well and forgive; and intentionally invest in building warmth and emotional connection in the relationship are vital skills for couples to have in order to flourish. Proactively equipping people with essential relationship habits as a key part of personal and professional development across society must become a strategic priority to help address the costs and challenges of relationship breakdown and create a healthier society*
- *We should strive to get across the idea that the "wedding" should not be the happiest day of your life, but rather the first step in working on a relationship that is going to get better and last the rest of your life.*
- *Good marriage preparation made available to all in committed relationships, not just those wanting a church wedding*
- *I think it is so important for the couple to really understand marriage first, to know why God created it and to really think about what God can use their marriage for. To have good marriage prep and to talk about real things, even if they seem 'taboo' ... Also making sure to create a good support for that couple once they are married and in the months/year to come, making sure that they know that all couples struggle as marriage is hard, but allowing them to not feel alone in that*
- *Marriage prep, pastoral support for people in trouble or stress; advice and debt support for those in difficulties and need; a warm welcome for all regardless of their family shape and size - over 30% of this community are in single parent families*
- *Importance of love and forgiveness. Importance of commitment through different stages of life and in times of difficulty - support needed for couples facing tough times. Knowing they are not alone when times are hard*
- *The Old Testament talks about newly married couples having a year off together! We need to support couples who are struggling these days - both have to work just to keep*



a roof over their heads due to high rents and other costs which are looking set to rise. Couples are under enormous strain. No one can flourish under that pressure

- *Our faith tells us that commitment to these relationships is important, but also that there will be times of difficulty and conflict where help may be needed. It tells us that reconciliation wherever possible enables healing and flourishing. It also tells us that where the difficulties have proved to be irreconcilable, there is always forgiveness and redemption available. Help may be needed in developing self-awareness, in communication, in listening and understanding that the other person's story may be different to our own expectations and values, and finding strategies to work together through difference*
- *Marriage is one of God's inventions. Marriage counselling in the Christian context is a necessary part of the support that the Church should facilitate. This should extend to the full range of sexual matters that are often avoided, to the detriment of real people who have real problems ... This goes from childhood and teen understanding of sex right through adult relationship support*

Summary

The responses to this question highlighted the divide between different perspectives on marriage: whether it should be exclusive to one man and one woman or whether it can encompass a broader understanding of committed intimate relationships. Whichever view was taken, however, there was considerable consensus that marriage should be a life-long commitment and that it should be supported in good times and bad. For intimate relationships to flourish they require adherence to a set of values of which love is central.

Many responses referred to Christian teaching as providing a template for loving relationships to flourish:

- *As Christians we have been forgiven and our relationship with God has been restored. God does not require us to change before we come to him. We bring all our rubbish to him and he takes it away. He loves us unconditionally. This informs how we as an organisation support others in their relationships. We love because he first loved us and we meet people where they're at, warts and all ... The Christian faith is about having second chances and seeing the power of the Holy Spirit transform peoples' hearts. It is also about taking personal responsibility for those mistakes, not blaming others, or seeing the problem as out there but the problem is in our own heart. God's unconditional love is foundational to what we do ... Jesus models love in all its beauty and complexity. As Christians we learn and draw from the life of Christ to inform our own living and flourishing*



One response provided a clear perspective from a non-Christian viewpoint:

- *Islam sees the institution of marriage as a civil contract entered into freely with both parties able to stipulate conditions that should be mutually agreeable. This foundational framework forms the basis of the relationship. Islam discourages secret or private marriages and requires publicity of the union. A valid marriage is one that is entered into solemnly by making God and members of the families and the community present as witnesses to the commitment. Such an approach strengthens identity and stability. The public acknowledgement of two individuals becoming one entity helps the couple respect each other's individuality while working together to flourish as a couple*

And another reminded us about how all faiths value the solemnity of marriage:

- *In all faiths I believe the blessing of marriage is the glue that holds many couples together in difficult times. The solemn act, amongst all the bally-hoo, must be serious to the couple - with the support of all their family and friends*



When thinking about how to support marriages and other intimate couple relationships to flourish, in your view how can the teaching of Christian and other faiths inform government and public policy

In this question we were seeking to understand how the teaching from Christian and other faiths can inform government policies which impact on couple relationships and family life. The responses were rich and some were particularly detailed although many different and often divergent views were expressed. We report on these differing views here.

A few responses observed that there are very real differences between the various faith groups as to whether and how government can support marriage and couple relationships

- *We need to be candid and explain that different faiths carry different understandings of marriage. Christianity teaches mutual submission and flourishing between two equal persons of the opposite sex. The gospel teaches us that forgiveness, healing and the rebuilding of trust are found in Jesus. Instead of looking at divorce rates, the government should look at how many marriages have been saved in the church that would otherwise have ended in divorce*
- *The teaching of the Christian faith is not really compatible with the teachings of other faiths*

We noted that some respondents expressed a view that it is not the role of the church and faith groups to influence government policy:

- *It is not the job of the church to be a politically activist organisation ... What the Church needs to do is find the courage to reiterate its timeless messages in an era which is more lost and confused (partly because of the decline in Christianity) than any since the fall of Rome*
- *I am not sure faith should be so involved in politics and [the church] should concentrate on doing the work of faith in supporting families and offering healing, help and support*

A few others expressed the view that government does not listen to faith communities anyway, and that churches have followed government policy rather than influencing it:

- *Big question, but government don't listen or accept Christian faith anymore. Maybe the Church needs to enlighten government as to how inclusive some churches can be. Also how Christians are active in social justice and pastoral care*



- *The Bible has a great deal to say about marriage and relationships, which is practical and life building. The question remains whether Government Policy will accept Biblical values*
- *The Anglican church is quite broad so this can be a strength and also a weakness in terms of informing public policy, Faith groups have a part to play in raising minority voices and helping them to be heard*

A few responses were deeply critical of the church:

- *All the time the church belittles the experience of divorcees, for example, by forcing Ordinands and their partners, friends and family, to participate in the intrusive, degrading and sometimes (from a safeguarding point of view) dangerous faculty process, it is best for the church to consider carefully before it decides that it is qualified to inform government and public policy. Our own house is very far from being in order*
- *The church has been detrimental in informing government policy on marriage, causing hurt and damage to loving relationships. As an institution it could re-examine what it might mean to love one another before trying to inform government or public policy*
- *I do not think that government policies have been based on Christian teachings. Rather churches have bent their teachings to fit the government's policies rather than sticking to the truth of the Bible*
- *We live in a plural society, so I am not sure why we should assume that Christian teaching should inform government and public policy. Where it has, it is not good - e.g. the Church of England is allowed to discriminate and hold views about homosexuals that the rest of society find abhorrent*
- *I think public policy is way ahead of the church at the moment. We haven't even educated our own kids well about consent, sexual health, coercive control or how to negotiate a healthy relationship. And our policy on same-sex relationships is illegal anywhere outside our organisations. It's not good when the government is more moral than we are*
- *The government has equal opportunities legislation, the church does not abide by it!*
- *Until the church is able to catch up with society in the embracing of all relationships, it might be best to watch and learn rather than try and influence and inform*



Advocating for traditional marriage

Despite the doubts and criticisms expressed by some respondents, the majority suggested ways in which the teaching of the church and faith groups could influence government and public policy. Many people would like to see government support and reaffirm traditional marriage:

- *We need the government to give marriage more of a special place. However this must be done with compassion for those whose marriages are difficult or have failed. And we need to give an equally special place to singleness*
- *A strong nuclear family gives stability. The government has allowed same sex marriage, easy divorce and abortion which undermine society by disobeying God's law. Traditional family life is being undermined not supported. Personal and social education in schools has no moral, let alone Christian basis*
- *The Biblical idea of marriage must be actively upheld by the Church. It is the gold standard for the relationships that are the foundation of our society. Family breakdown drives housing shortages and poverty, hence the Church's support of marriage can have wider positive effects*
- *The C of E should be taking a lead in promoting the Biblical teaching on marriage and intimate relationships and the leadership of the C of E should be putting this forward to the government*
- *There isn't enough value placed on marriage by the government and society in this country*

Advocating for life-long commitment

Many respondents placed emphasis on the importance of promoting long-term commitment and advocating for stability in family life:

- *Being a voice for life-long commitment and not assuming all marriage is destined for divorce: setting expectations high*
- *Continue to hold the values with marriage/committed relationships in that a stable loving home, where all people flourish, is a good and positive place for the raising of children and grandchildren*



- *Promoting the normalcy of long-term relationships, and the value of love and commitment on human wellbeing*
- *The promotion of faithful loving and stable relationships can help. Stories such as David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, Jesus and the beloved disciple give scope for exploration beyond a traditional marriage model*
- *Commitment in relationships should be affirmed and rewarded*
- *A focus on permanence as more than an ideal - but supported by government policies - finance, childcare, support with housing, - all the stresses that lead to breakdown*
- *By reasserting the idea that marriage/intimate relations are more than a temporary arrangement of convenience that has significant consequences for family and society*

Preparing people for marriage and family life

There was considerable agreement that marriage is not easy and that preparation for it should be offered routinely for everyone getting married and all those preparing to form a committed relationship:

- *Most urgently, individuals and couples of whatever form need to be taught how to do relationships well so they can firstly choose partners well and secondly be equipped to overcome the inevitable challenges to relationships that they will no doubt encounter. Proactively equipping people with fundamental relationship skills as a key part of personal and professional development across society must become a strategic priority to help address the costs and challenges of relationship breakdown and create a healthier society. This includes learning fundamentals like how to understand differences; use conflict to strengthen rather than damage the relationship; have tough conversations around issues, core values and beliefs when necessary; apologise well and forgive; and intentionally invest in building warmth and emotional connection in the relationship to help equip couples to flourish ... We need a more holistic approach to strengthening couples and families across the nation as part of government strategy*
- *As a church we are shocked at the lack of marriage preparation that is offered by civil celebrants. There is no other life-long commitment that one would dream of entering without some kind of preparation (even those getting a tattoo seem to get more input!). As a church we provide marriage preparation courses which participants find really valuable, and ongoing marriage courses too which again have really helped struggling relationships. The idea that you just walk away if it is getting hard is sadly too prevalent in public policy thinking*



- *More marriage prep should be done so people know what they are heading into and an appreciation that it is hard and something that needs to be worked at*

Some people advocated for the provision of ongoing support for relationships beyond the wedding itself:

- *The Church should be bold to recognise that all marriages are imperfect and fragile when under pressure. I often use the analogy of 'servicing a car'. Many of not most people have their car serviced annually/after 10k miles on the clock; we would expect wear and tear. We need to do this for marriage too, if we really believe that long-term committed relationships are the bedrock of stable and healthy society*

Supporting families when parents split up

Many responses referred to the need for better support when relationships break down and couples split up, recognising the tension between marriage as a commitment for life and the reality of relationships breaking down:

- *Religious beliefs should help to promote joint parenting whether together and apart and policies that encourage this e.g. provision of support for independent and more equal parental leave for mothers and fathers (as offered in increasing numbers of other jurisdictions - in fact the UK has the biggest differential in such statutory provision in the world)*
- *We can look at good examples of what it means to be in a relationship that is loving through examples in the Bible and we can use these examples to highlight when domestic abuse and poor treatment of people in relationships is unacceptable*
- *It is vital and urgent that funds are put into relationship breakdown and sorting out the issues at the time of the crisis as this will massively reduce court costs, mental health issues*
- *The government should definitely work harder to promote family values, tighten up cultural messages that serve capitalism rather than society. We need to find a way of helping people escape bad marriages that doesn't also make it easy to end or leave lazy marriages*
- *It [the church] informs with two truths in tension: 1) Marriage relationships are precious, valuable, and worthy of support. It is right for Government policy to respond to marriage relationships and families as combined units, responding to them as a whole, and respecting, for instance, parental rights. 2) Marriage relationships are*



fallible and can fail. When that happens the support of the wider community is needed, and freedom must be a guiding principle. In the broadening and deepening that comes from the Christian understanding of marriage we can recognise that familial relationships can and do take place outside of the biological family unit; that, at times, when it is best for someone to leave their biological family (e.g. to be placed in care, or to escape an abusive context) the responsibilities and joys of that relationships can be found within the spiritual family/wider community.

- *Provision for mediation and support to help couples in difficulty, encouragement to try and resolve issues if possible before a decision to split up/divorce is made. Help and support with some of the common areas that lead to relationship problems e.g. debt, addiction, mental health, parenting issues*
- *Promote marriage, but also help when things go wrong, perhaps by helping to provide counselling when couples struggle (and funding safe places for those who need to flee their homes in case of domestic violence etc. Help those who have suffered to start again with their children)*
- *I would like to see free couple counselling available locally for everyone because talking and being honest is so important*
- *The Quran and Sunnah stipulates that just as we enter marriage with positivity, affection and genuine care and concern for each other, should circumstances dictate that we have to part ways then this should be done amicably and in a dignified manner without apportioning blame on each other or their respective families. Rather, one should reflect on their experience of pain and grief to identify areas of improvement and take necessary steps to bring about positive change to their lives*

Ensuring family-friendly policies

A number of people argued for government policies to be more family-friendly and specifically designed to support couple relationships. The policies considered included those relating to social security benefits, income, taxation, housing and meeting basic needs. There was also recognition of the recent stresses on family life as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and the increased cost of living:

- *Advocate for people in crisis and find out what they need. Then provide it. I don't remember a time when the country was under so much stress e.g. BREXIT, COVID, uncontrolled migration, terrorism and politicians without morals or integrity*
- *For the sake of health and stability in society for the future, government and public policy must encourage and support the family arrangements that foster the greatest*



stability. Currently marriages are penalised because the universal credit payments cease when two become one. Government must re-examine policies around income and benefits to support family stability and marriage specifically. Further, policies that support BOTH mothers and fathers to earn, to work flexibly for both parents to be present and involved, and to give meaningful childcare support are vital in helping children to flourish

- *We could help them [government] to see tolerance and that God loves everyone so everyone should be equal and given the same opportunities*
- *When a policy is drawn up its effect on marriages etc. should be taken into account, especially if people have parental responsibilities*
- *Financial and tax provision to ensure married/committed people are not penalized in comparison to people who live together without such formal commitment: equal treatment for all. More low-cost housing for small families - an increase in Council housing and housing associations and other providers. This needs to be subsidised by central government, not local authorities whose resources are already cut back and which are stretched disproportionately if they are a poor area*
- *Public policy needs to support the needs of families - address issues of health, poverty, housing, etc. and people will find it much easier to support their own relationships*
- *We know that marriages/families who are under pressure may struggle more to manage through difficult/testing times. Currently the economic system pushes both partners to work in order to try and afford to meet their basic essential living costs (housing, heating, food, clothing, transport, bills etc.). This can put enormous strain on some families where they are very stretched to have capacity to spend time with their families and in their community. Many may have additional caring roles, which are essential for others flourishing, but this does not appear to be valued or allowed for in our public policies ... We need to find ways of re-orientating our view of economics so that it holds values that are good for individuals and society as a whole ... I believe that Christian teaching would support an economic system which is fairer and allows all to flourish*
- *Adequate housing, sufficient income with frameworks that do not penalise larger than average families; protection for employees that enables work/life balance; support for affordable childcare especially for single parent families; adequate parental leave and flexibility about working patterns so that people can accommodate caring responsibilities*



- *Everyone is valued and families come in all shapes and sizes with none being of more value than others but those with children are particularly vulnerable and need extra support. Adverse experiences in childhood have a lifelong impact and society should provide structures that minimise these. These mean optimising early childhood experiences through good antenatal and midwifery provision, good access to health services and education, good nutrition and a healthy environment*
- *It [the church] can inform that these relationships are of fundamental importance in people's flourishing, and therefore policies that support these and family relationships are vital for a society that thrives. This might lead to policies that strengthen family life and help people to stay together where appropriate, and to a tax system that supports marriage and family life*
- *More compassion and dignity given to those who care- not just clapping once a week and saying thanks. Dignity comes through pay which allows families that work in those professions to be able to afford to feed their families without visiting food banks*
- *First, recognising that it is important that policy of various kinds (tax, inheritance, benefits etc.) support the forming and sustaining of family life. Second, ensuring that the kinds of family life so supported and sustained can be widely various. Third, ensuring that in providing this support singleness is not stigmatised*

Reducing inequality and injustice

One or two people wrote primarily about the need to reduce inequality in society:

- *I would try to concentrate not on individual responsibility or spirituality or behaviour but instead to concentrate on our collective responsibility to stamp out injustice, inequality and poverty. These are the issues that are the most destructive to any child or family experiencing them*

Providing community support

The need for greater community support was prevalent in a few responses and one specifically mentioned the developing family hubs network:

- *The disintegration of UK communities and increasing isolation/loneliness means that many are feeling disconnected from their wider communities. Marriages need wider community support. God places marriages and families in a wider community for*



flourishing. A way of nurturing growth as well as keeping people safe, by identifying and getting the right support for marriages that are abusive and destructive. Churches play a key role, because they are already a natural community groups, with strong relational foundations, where couples, singles and families gather. [The] 'Levelling-up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant' are important. As are initiatives like the faith covenant that support the partnership between local services and faith groups and the family hubs network

Summary

While some respondents were sceptical about whether the church and faith groups have a role to play in influencing government policy, and others were critical of the church's own policies, most suggested ways in which the church and faith groups could urge the government to promote marriage and emphasise the importance of stability in long-term relationships. Others mentioned a range of policy areas which impact on family life. There was considerable support for the church being involved in the policy agenda at some level:

- *Faith needs to have a place at the government table. Policy needs to be more long term and pan-political*
- *The Church should be a critical friend, a voice for the marginalised, speaking up for the vast majority of the public being screwed over by government*
- *Faith can support moral development and consideration for others. There seems to be a reluctance to acknowledge Christianity sometimes at government level*

A few others advocated the need for the church to work in partnership with other sectors:

- *We all need to work together to ensure that charities, the church, other faiths, organisations are informing government of the negative effects of policy on family life - the Universal Credit decision to withdraw the additional £20 from families was clear example of a decision that was being made, but voices (including our own as a charity) were not heard so we need to think this through and come up with a way of making sure this collective voice is heard*

Some people suggested that all faith leaders should work together to indicate their shared beliefs and values:

- *Whilst Christianity is our national faith - all faith leaders should band together to show how many things are shared beliefs and values. What there is in common is more than our differences but these are not evident to government or politicians*



When thinking about children and childhood, in what ways does your faith, or that of your organisation, inform how we should value and support children and young people to flourish?

The Commission is seeking the views of children and young people around England about what is important to them in their lives and for the future. In the Call for Evidence, however, we wanted to hear from adults about the ways in which their faith can inform the support of children and young people. While the vast majority of responses came from a Christian perspective, a few people commented on the stance taken by different religions in respect of childhood:

- *There are so many different belief systems in the world about what human wellbeing entails. Understandings of what it means to be a 'child' are also highly variable*

A very few responses questioned the value of Christian scriptures or the propriety of church involvement in supporting children:

- *Children will flourish without your propaganda and indoctrination*
- *The Church needs to stop trying to support children and young people until it has addressed safeguarding issues*

This kind of response was very much in the minority and the vast majority of responses were rich in their understanding of what faith can teach us about caring for children. We report on the main themes to emerge here. We noted that respondents did not distinguish between children of different ages, nor did they talk specifically about teenagers and young people. The focus, as in the question, was primarily on childhood and how children can be supported to flourish.

Valuing children as a gift

A significant number of respondents wrote in terms of children being a blessing, a gift or a heritage which gives adults and families specific responsibilities to nurture children. The following response emphasised this from a Muslim perspective:

- *The Quran and Sunnah have many references and advice regarding the need to provide a supportive environment to help children flourish and achieve their true potential. Children are seen a gift to the parents and an amaanah (trust) to the community. Children have been entrusted to the family so they can play a positive part in their upbringing and wellbeing. This includes biological nurture, physical protection, emotional & educational support and spiritual progress so that these children can*



grow up and flourish to be responsible citizens of their society and in return fulfil their collective responsibility of amanah (trust) for the next generation to flourish

The belief that children are a gift was articulated by many respondents answering from a Christian viewpoint:

- *From a Christian perspective, children are a blessing, a gift and a heritage from the Lord. It is our responsibility to nurture them, provide for them and train them in the proven ways of success in life - seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. Throughout the Bible, the tender loving care we are meant to give children is used as a metaphor for how our loving heavenly Father tenderly cares for us. Jesus modelled this by giving time and attention to the children. In the same way, we are called to love our children with our time, attention and gentle presence. Fathers in particular are urged not to provoke children to anger by the way they treat them. We are also to provide for their needs*
- *Children are a gift from God and, as Christians, they are Children of God and destined to inherit His kingdom if they are supported and taught on that path. So, they must be loved, valued and supported to grow in a loving, peaceful and trusting atmosphere*
- *Children are a gift from God and bring new life and hope, so we should invest time and energy into them for our own sake as well as theirs*
- *Children are a gift from God and they should be treated with respect, love and be nurtured in a wholesome environment free from fear and intimidation*

Encouraging children in their development

The majority of responses indicated how children should be encouraged in their development, partly through knowing that they are loved, and also through learning and being able to reach their potential. Some people listed the qualities inherent in a duty of care towards children:

- *Children should be exposed to positive learning and care for their wellbeing. We should encourage children to be confident, connect with their environment and have a sense of identity. We should help children to communicate effectively*
- *Children need to know that they are loved unconditionally and that that love is not based on what they achieve or their skills or how they look etc. It is just because they are them. They need to know that it's okay to make mistakes. They need to have a safe*



space to go out from to explore the world and to return to. They need to have a family (whatever that looks like) with whom they live and a church family where they can have opportunities that can't necessarily be provided in the home environment

- *[The church should] Support them to be the individuals God has called them to be. Teach them to have a voice founded on good morals. Teach them to have a social conscience. Teach them we all make mistakes and can say sorry and be forgiven*
- *Knowing that this child is a unique, wonderful and precious creation of God, loved by God more than we can imagine, and created by God to be the amazing adult they have the potential to become, and able to bring tremendous blessing to others if only they are enabled to grow into that person and fulfil their potential*
- *Children should be loved, cared for, mentored and at appropriate ages guided. They should be encouraged to differentiate between good and evil ...*
- *... children and young people are incredibly valuable, and they should be taught to believe in themselves and supported to achieve their full potential*
- *Children should be themselves and have the chance to express themselves and develop at their own pace. My faith as a Christian puts children as an equal member in a family and helps them develop a strong moral core that is not judgemental*

A few people emphasised the importance of the first five years of life and others referred to the need to protect children:

- *[The] First five years are critical. All children should have access to the same quality and criteria within education. Biggest challenge is to find ways to protect young people from gangs, drugs and all types of abuse by parents and others*
- *Our Christian faith tells us that children need to grow up with an understanding that they and others around them are valued for who they are, and that their value is unconditional. They need to experience relationships that are safe, secure, genuine and consistent where they can learn trust. They need opportunities to explore their environment and develop curiosity and creativity. They need appropriate boundaries. They need good role models to demonstrate how to both express and appropriately contain their emotions. They need opportunities to develop their spirituality and relationship with God, as part of a worshipping community*
- *My faith enables me to: Show kindness, care and love to children, do everything I can to protect them from harm and danger. Give them opportunities to express their feelings/views and listen to them. Advocate on their behalf for clean and healthy*



community, advocate to eradicate child poverty and poor nutrition. Support safeguarding protocols for children and vulnerable young people

A few respondents referred to allowing children to be themselves, regardless of their sexuality:

- *Allow children to discover who they are without making them feel they have to pretend or hide their sexuality*

Listening to children

In order to enable children to develop well and to flourish, a number of responses spoke specifically about the need to listen to children:

- *Children are just as important as any other person, but are also vulnerable in many ways. It is important to allow children to have a voice - to listen to them and not impose an adult's perspective onto their situation. I believe children flourish when given the opportunity to explore who they are, to make occasional mistakes, but to learn from these and grow into the people God means them to be*
- *So we should surround them with love and look after their daily needs and allow them to be different, to have a voice, to agree/disagree, to learn and choose for themselves but in a loving and protected environment. Allow them to step out (and fall if need be) but not be crushed. Allow them to be young and have the advantages of the young, but provide all the support they need*
- *Let the children come to me. Children and young people have lots of important things to tell us and in listening we can learn much from them*
- *Children and young people are not lesser than adults, and their voices are as valuable (indeed, St Benedict would say the voice of the youngest should be given special honour)*
- *We need to challenge our sometimes common ideas of doing things for children and young people and lean more into listening to what our young people want and learning to better walk with them to achieve with love and belief*
- *Listen to their views: 'a little child shall lead them' Isaiah 11*
- *Children should be listened to and believed. They must be taken seriously*



Investing time

Others were keen to emphasise that time needs to be invested in listening to and supporting children:

- *Their early experiences will mould them into the adults they become so investment of time, understanding and patience are critical to their future and how they then relate to others as adults*
- *Children need time and attention from those around them, people with time to listen to them. They need opportunities to be able to discover what gifts and skills they have and what brings joy to their lives. They need support and encouragement to be part of communities where they are valued for who they are*

Learning from the teaching of Jesus

Large numbers of responses emphasised that everyone, including children, is made in the image of God and, as such, everyone should be valued equally. They referred to the teaching of Jesus as giving direction to how we should value and support children:

- *We believe that everyone is made in the image of God ... Even though Jesus did not have any children Himself, He would not prevent them from being welcomed into His presence; He used them as examples of faith to adults; He warned people about the consequences of mistreating them ... Our faith makes children a priority. Jesus welcomed little children and blessed them. He encourages us to do the same*
- *All people are made in the image of God and as such have worth in them and are worthy of love, respect and time. Passing on our faith and traditions to them and allowing them to learn from them, but also to inform and evolve (with) them ... Sometimes children and young people see things with a much needed and necessary innocence and simplicity*
- *We are called to pass on the faith to the next generation - Psalm 145:4. We all have a part to play in discipleship of children and, as Jesus said - children are the greatest in the kingdom of God. They have a part in the church and a role to play now and have gifts and God given abilities to use to build up the church*
- *Let the little children come to me. To welcome and encourage them. Our sense of reconciliation and forgiveness allowing children and young people to make mistakes but to learn and grow in Christ*
- *Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, for the Kingdom of Heaven is made of such as these". Acceptance, welcome, inclusion and belonging are all important*



A few replies noted that the vulnerability of children reflects our condition before God:

- *We are children of God and should treat each other and children the way God treats us, with grace, patience and joy*

Caring for children

In talking about caring for children, some answers focused on providing for children's basic needs, the responsibilities of the parents and the responsibilities of the communities in which families live, and recognised the enormity of the task to bring up children well:

- *[Children are] Made in image of God and thus valued in their own right, not for what they do. Treat with care, no exploitation or abuse or inappropriate emotional control. Provide necessary housing, food, clothes etc. for safe and healthy development. Offer support and encouragement to make their own appropriate decisions as they grow and mature*
- *Jesus said, "Suffer the little children to come to me for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." Young children display many of the attributes which we are told to strive for (e.g. honesty, trust). Children should be respected and supported to enable them to achieve their potential within a loving, supportive family and society. In reality all families need enormous support to enable them to provide the optimal environment for each child, whatever the child's needs*
- *Love is what grounds children in feeling they belong and are accepted and 'love one another' is what Jesus tells us to do. When children have suffered early trauma or rejection it may be enormously difficult for them to accept or internalise love. Love may look like a long-term commitment to a child or young person in the face of deep rejection*
- *Since the beginning of time, God has set His people apart to love and cherish the vulnerable. Children are vulnerable in that they have little agency to begin with and are at the mercy of others to care for them. But, as such, they are highly valued because they reflect our own condition before God. We have a responsibility not only for children born to our family but to those in society who have not found a safe haven. 'It takes a village to raise a child'. It is our Christian duty to offer all children respect, listen to their voices, protect them where possible*



- *Church is a good community to raise children if the community care for each other, celebrating families' milestones, supporting each other, learning about God together*
- *We have a responsibility not only for children born to our family but to those in society who have not found a safe haven. 'It takes a village to raise a child'. It is our Christian duty to offer all children respect, listen to their voices, protect them where possible*

Growing in faith

A fairly small number of respondents emphasised the importance of bringing children up in faith and introducing them to the scriptures:

- *Children should know a particular faith, particularly Christian faith through Biblical stories and narratives. Bible ethics should be part of their formation and growth*
- *Children should be presented faith in an engaging and creative way as being part of normal life*
- *Children should be welcomed into the church setting, encouraged to participate where sensible. Congregations should be delighted to have children within their midst. The teachings of Jesus inform the basis for living a good life. Learning right from wrong. Choirs that welcome children give them confidence and a different kind of education, as well as the joy of singing to the glory of God*
- *Children are the present as well as the future. Children need to be intentionally taught the faith*
- *Children and young people are the future of the church and if we don't invest and provide ways for them to engage in issues around faith and what it means to be a follower of Jesus, then we are missing a primary part of our call as the established church to preach and share the gospel message afresh to each generation*
- *Children should be taught the Bible which contains all the moral laws as well as spirituality. The Jews use our Old Testament so they have the same tradition. The outline from Jesus is to Love God and love your neighbour - such a good way to live*



Setting a good example

In addition to caring responsibly for children and bringing them up in faith, several respondents urged that adults should set a good example:

- *Alongside that is the duty of all adults to set a good example for children to follow - telling the truth, behaving honourably, putting others first, offering care to those in need, respecting others' sensibilities and so on. Scripture Sources e.g.: 2 Timothy 3:16-17*
- *Lead by example, be a good role model*
- *Setting an example and implementing it.*
- *Encouraging them [children] to strive to be the best they can be and allowing them to feel safe and loved at home. Giving them space to explore their world. Setting a positive example and teaching them to respect others*

Supporting marriage and family stability

A few people offered quite detailed responses in which they talked about the importance of bringing children up within a stable marriage:

- *The most obvious way to support children is by supporting marriage. Children do not need their parents to be happy or in love or to have a good sex-life. They need stability with a capital S and hopefully love (though I think it more important to demonstrate this by one's choices than to talk about it) and good values. A strong moral foundation is the best gift a community can give its children*
- *The most important gift any couple can give to their children or future children is to commit to one another through marriage. Humans and relationships are fallible. However, the best environment within which to raise children and give them their best odds of flourishing is within a married household. Having said that, we are also commanded to love one another. So this also means encouraging and supporting lone parents to help share the burden of their otherwise heroic single-handed task while also being prepared to challenge gently couples who have not made a clear commitment to one another*
- *Children flourish within a loving family. I believe in the sanctity of marriage as a way of providing that love and security. Children should be viewed holistically, therefore*



their physical, social, emotional and spiritual needs must be met in order for them to survive and achieve. The community, in particular the church, should encourage and support children and their families through example, family activities, engagement with local schools

Supporting children when parents split up

A few respondents acknowledged the need to support children when parents split up, which includes supporting parents to reach agreement about how they will parent together while living apart:

- *We believe that there is a need for early support and intervention to assist as many parents as possible in coming to agreements without relying on courts which are slow, expensive, re-traumatising and generally add to conflict rather than promoting parental collaboration*
- *We support children and young adults that have parents who are separated/divorced and our aim is (i) to support and restore the child to a healthy relationship with both their parents (who may not be focusing as "normal" on their child but on their own massive life crisis and suffering themselves); and (ii) build tools and skills of how to make relationships work so that they are empowered to have their own good relationships and not continue the cycle of relationship breakdown which is endemic in society today ... The institution of the church rightly focuses on marriage and supporting healthy marriages (let's do more of this please!) however we ignore and push away people in broken relationships. This causes a negative cycle in children that undermines marriage, builds distrust in long term relationships and commitment ... The church has all the tools and skills to teach about restoration, healing, forgiveness, healthy relationships, however we have ignored this area to the detriment of marriage and the family ...*

Summary

The vast majority of respondents to this question offered suggestions as to how the church and faith communities can support children to flourish. Many referred to the teaching of Jesus as providing guidance for caring for children and the need to give time and commitment to the task. A few people broadened their answers to refer to the wider societal challenges facing families and communities and how church activities can play an active part in addressing these:

- *Children and young people are members of communities and, as such, also face the challenges associated with poverty, deprivation, and loneliness. The flourishing that*



was informed by John 10:10 is inclusive of children and young people. Indeed, Jesus himself in Matthew 19:14 set out the special place that children have

A theme running through a number of responses was that children are made in the image of God and that God is intentional in his creation. It is seen as essential therefore to look to the future and the role children and young people will play in it. The following very detailed response addressed the need for holistic support:

- *All children are fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God, regardless of whether they have a faith ... God is intentional in his creation of his children (Psalm 119:73) and the provision of family for growth. He gives each a divine purpose and plan (Jeremiah 29:11) and bestows them as a gift and reward on their earthly parents (Psalm 127:3) ... Flourishing has to mean flourishing of the whole child (body, mind and soul) and in the context of their family (or wider church family). All of this informs how we care for children. If we are serious about caring for and supporting the most vulnerable in our society, then we will be serious about supporting and providing families who care for them ... When one person in a family struggles, the whole family struggles. A child's struggle may also reflect the parents' struggle/conflict. Giving direct support to a child is one thing, but since all families often gather together at church, we also have the opportunity to support the parents and siblings to help the whole family flourish, which in turn will impact on each child's own flourishing. The next generation's world is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate, and parents are struggling to know how to connect with their children and their world ... Churches have an important role to play in supporting parents to have those open honest and meaningful conversations with each other and their children, to help grow and build stronger connections ... We need to listen to our children more - to honour their insights and questions and to recognise that children can positively influence the community and the moral and spiritual lives of adults*

Some responses reminded us that families come in all shapes and sizes and need to be supported whatever their background:

- *Jesus was very clear in his teaching that we had to be like little children to enter the kingdom of God, and I think we can often forget this. We can also be at danger of neglecting those families that don't look like our own (whatever that is - e.g. working class/middle class, single parents/same-sex parents, racial issues etc.) - and the church has much to lament in the way it has not supported families who differ from the perceived "norm" support those (the "fatherless", or the "widows") who are without their own family*
- *Every child needs to know unconditional positive regard for them as bearers of the image of God. Churches are not always great at this when children don't fit into expected boxes e.g. because of disability, neurodiversity or being LGBT*



- *Every child needs to know unconditional positive regard for them as bearers of the image of God. Churches are not always great at this when children don't fit into expected boxes e.g. because of disability, neurodiversity or being LGBT*
- *Jesus loved the children, he called them to himself. From this I conclude that children and young people should feel welcomed and valued. They are the key, the kingdom of heaven belongs to them! So let's celebrate them and allow them to be involved in all we do.*



What insights can be drawn from the Christian tradition and other religions and scriptures about the role of parenting in enabling children to flourish?

Having asked about what the scriptures can tell us about supporting children to flourish, we wanted to discover how the Christian tradition and other religions provide insights into the role of parenting. The answers to this question revealed a sharp division of opinion as to whether the Bible and other scriptures provide any useful insights about the role of parenting in enabling children to flourish, with some responses expressing negative views and others offering a variety of positive views. We report on all the views here.

Finding little help in the scriptures

A substantial number of responses expressed the view that the Bible is of little or no help for parenting:

- *Not a lot, from a Christian scripture*
- *I don't think it [the Bible] has much to say*
- *Nothing. The inbuilt misogyny and concepts of sin are particularly damaging*
- *We might need to look beyond the Bible for parenting roles. Abraham may not be a good role model in this respect. Jesus was not a parent. The Bible gives us a clear understanding of what love and relationships should be like but does not try to be a parenting handbook*
- *Maybe not a lot from bible. But in a good church children are valued*
- *The Christian tradition has remarkably little to say about parenting, save a few disturbing passages. Abraham is asked to sacrifice Isaac; any number of mothers offer their children to serve the Lord. Our children are clearly not our own: that's the lesson*

Some respondents commented that the Bible and other scriptures are of little relevance in today's society while others acknowledged the challenges of parenting:

- *I don't believe that the biblical teachings on the family are particularly helpful to our society today*
- *Parenting is complex in scriptures*



- *Sadly, historically the Christian tradition has done children an injustice, whether by using scripture to control the children in unhealthy ways (spare the rod and spoil the child) or admonishing them to 'be seen and not heard'. Jesus said the children should be allowed to come to him, but in nearly all ways we have put barriers in their path, from formal fusty services, to tutting adults, and cold, dark churches*
- *Nothing really prepares you for the joys of parenting and the impact of this - a more honest discussion about a biblical mandate for parenting, and how this is understood in the 21st century would be helpful - and resources too*
- *Many young people can be harmed by over prescriptive religion. We need to be much more relaxed and much more about helping young people to flourish than to follow our chosen model*
- *Christian teaching on parenting is no different from non-Christian parenting except for the faith element, which is an additional factor. Parenting is a social skill that all possess to various levels of ability. Faith might help support the less effective parent down to a church community etc. but it does not make you a better parent*

A few people reflected that the Bible provides many examples of poor parenting:

- *The Bible has more examples of parents who messed up their children to be honest. But the example of God as a parent is consistent, hopeful, positive and persevering*
- *The Bible is very honest about really rubbish parenting being the norm, but that as Jesus was born into a family, it is still the best option to help human beings become who they are meant to be*

Learning from the Bible and scriptures

An equally large number of respondents affirmed the role of the Bible in suggesting how parenting allows children to flourish, many pointing to specific texts or Biblical characters:

- *Through looking at the Blessed Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph we see examples of how two parents overcame troubles to raise a child - no other religion provides the truth on how a parent can love a child except for Christianity*
- *The Christian understanding of parenthood has anchors in Genesis and Romans. We are made in the image of God (Genesis) but are fallen (Genesis) and fall short of God's glory (Romans) and yet it is the Spirit within us that enables us to cry 'Abba Father'*



(Romans). The combination of beauty and brokenness of humanity plays itself out in all relationships, but the redemptive work of the Holy Spirit enables us to bring God into those relationships. In the power of the Spirit, we are able to parent children in a way that sees them flourish. Much of Christian teaching about parenting is found in nearly all parenting courses - both secular and Christian. Security, love, consistent boundaries, meeting physical and emotional needs and encouraging wisdom when making choices, really enable children to flourish within loving families and this is what the Bible encourages

- *Moses thrived in Pharaoh's house, his foster mother raised him. Jesus was nurtured by his parents hence the worry when he went missing. Parents like Abraham and Joseph father of Jesus are examples of great parents*
- *Our understanding of parenting draws upon our understanding of the relationship between Christ and his people, and also from our sense of God as Father. Within that imagery are paternal and maternal concepts that inform, guide, and shape our own understanding of parenting. It recognises that children need parents. It causes parents to aspire to the "unconditional love" that God exercises - his gentleness, his grace, his desire to give of himself towards the flourishing of his children. It speaks of the appropriate place for discipline, not as an expression of harshness or punitively, but towards guiding a child towards the integrated health of flourishing. As we parent our children, we recognise that they are learning not just something about us, but also something of how God might be in his character; this makes it a weighty burden, we do not want to misrepresent God to our children!*
- *Deuteronomy. Moses commands the people of Israel to pass on their faith and traditions to their children and so on... in traditions and ceremonies but importantly in the everyday business of life. Unless children are in Jesus, their flourishing is ultimately a chasing after the wind - so prioritise passing on the good news about Jesus*

Several responses referred to the teaching in Proverbs:

- *For me this is clearly laid out in Proverbs when it says, 'Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old, they will not turn from it.' Those values are not just present in our own Christian tradition but other faiths too*
- *The parents are expected to care, love protect their children, bring them up and train them up in the way they should go-Proverbs 22. Parents should be encouraged not to have unrealistic expectations of children. Parents should nurture their child and teach them right from wrong and exercise safe and appropriate boundary and discipline - Proverbs 23: 13-14. Fathers do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord -Ephesians 6:4*



- *Proverbs talks about the mix of love and discipline. The story of the Prodigal Son also encapsulates it neatly. Even without knowing any social science, were we to predict from these stories the key factors in encouraging children to flourish, we might easily pick on 'love and boundaries'*
- *God as our loving, faithful, patient, forgiving, just, merciful Father and us as His children; instructions from Paul, Proverbs etc. to parents*

Providing role models

A number of respondents talked about the importance of parents as role models and setting an example for their children, including spiritual and moral examples:

- *Scripture teaches us to instruct our children in faith. We are to be an example of faith to our children Christian teaching is about life in all its fullness and this can be the experience of our children*
- *Model the behaviour you want from your child. Talk about feelings. Give children responsibility. Communicate effectively*
- *The love and security offered by both parents in different ways are vital for enabling children to flourish. Parents provide love through affirmation, resources, wisdom, guidance, healthy boundaries as well as loving discipline and correction when necessary to keep children flourishing. Most importantly, parents provide role models for children to follow because children learn what they live*
- *Parents must model grace, they must model saying sorry to their kids [sic] when they have done something wrong*
- *I come back to the thought of being kind to one another - to our friends, to our children, and modelling this well. I am just thinking of a kids club I help with, and how we seek to model being kind, and encourage the children to be kind to one another - a simple thing, but by doing so, we build relationships and community, and we enable the parents and children who come to flourish too*

This latter comment also spoke of the importance of parents 'living their lives pointing to Jesus as their Saviour', modelling this to their children.

- *Parents provide a spiritual and moral example and lead the children to discover more of God's love and teaching for themselves*



- *God is described in the bible as the role model of a loving father, who provides for His children. The bible tells us not to frustrate our children*

Ensuring loving relationships

A number of responses referred in one way or another to the importance of there being a mutual loving relationship between parents and their children:

- *Loving relationships of mutuality and self-giving are at the heart of parenting*
- *Parenting should be a caring loving relationship in order for children to flourish. Children should obey their parents but parents should also respect their children*
- *The greatest role of parenting is loving, supporting and developing a safe and secure home, where all are honoured and nurtured to live a good life*
- *Parenting should be a caring loving relationship in order for children to flourish. Children should obey their parents but parents should also respect their children*
- *Parenting involves sacrifice. Hannah giving Samuel to God. Abraham willing to sacrifice his son on the altar. Mary, watching her son die. It involves forgiveness - prodigal son, Jacob surely had to forgive his older sons for what they had done to Joseph, Jesuits and proverbs - train up a child in the way he should go, and he will not depart from it. Jesus says a father knows how to give good gifts to his children*
- *Supporting parents to have meaningful connected relationships with their children creates more open and honest conversations and allows for better flourishing and growth*

Some respondents talked about the relationship between loving and setting boundaries:

- *Love and boundaries go hand in hand. Parenting can be hard - listen to the wisdom of those who have been there before, but that should be offered in love and with an awareness that every generation of children lives in a different context as society changes*
- *Children need boundaries, they need to feel secure, they need the family to be a place where they can question and learn, where they see good examples*
- *MAKE THEM FEEL SEEN!! -To always ask about how they are, their mental health, how they're doing emotionally before you ask anything about grades or compare them to anyone -To accept them for exactly who they are, that you see that they may be*



different to yourself as a parent or their siblings but to make them feel loved for just simply being them (even if you don't quite understand yourself) -To let them know that you will love them no matter what -To create really healthy boundaries growing up so they have these for going into adulthood -Let them know that they can always come to you, no matter how bad it is or how much they've 'screwed' up, to let them know there is grace just like God offers them

Promoting values

As with the responses to some other questions in the Call for Evidence, a number of answers comprised what can be called 'lists of precepts for parents'. These included the kinds of values and qualities parents should demonstrate in their parenting:

- *Children need to be nurtured, encouraged, taught, led and given their own purpose in life*
- *Role of parenting to enable children to flourish: 1- offer unconditional love. 2- offer a steady foundation of togetherness through commitment to each other, so children can sense and imitate. 3- be kind but firm. 4- instruct on guidelines of good behaviour at an early age. 5- family rules apply to all members of the family. 6 - teach them to distinguish between right and wrong. 7- offer them a listening ear, support them and be their friend*
- *Children are described as a gift from God: Psalm 127:3. How we treat children is very important Matthew 19:14-15 and Matthew 18:5-6. Good values should be passed on to our children and parents are responsible to God for how they care for and bring up their children*
- *They [children] are valued for who they are and not what they will become. Shema-nurturing and sharing everything with your children. Ephesians 6:4 "Do not exasperate your children"*
- *The Bible has many examples of how parents need to give time, care, instruction, love and support to their children. Also not provoking your children to anger! (Ephesians 6:4). As parents we should be showing them the love, mercy, care and compassion that Christ has shown us. At the same time we would want to bring them up in a way that 'instructs' them in the way of Christ*



Providing family stability

A few responses referred to the need for parents to provide a loving and stable family in which children can flourish:

- *Family stability, principles of loving care, positive recognition of the dignity and individuality of children - we are ALL made in the image of God (which should be reflected in family and community life*
- *The importance of stable family units where there is no discord or violence, where love and respect for each other is shown*
- *The love and security offered by both parents in different ways are vital for enabling children to flourish*
- *The Lord has entrusted children to us to instruct and shepherd. But it is a tough task, especially for those children who have had a tough start in life. We need to seek encouragement from one another. Our goal for parenting is not right behaviour, that will come if we seek to impart wisdom and faith, through compassion and love*
- *It can be summed up as: parents must put their children first. That means staying married when they might prefer not to. It means forgiving and overlooking behaviour which is outrageous (though not that which is criminal), so as not to penalise their innocent children. It means giving up hopes and wishes because these cannot be accommodated within the marriage. It's tough but there is nothing which can be accomplished without it. Parents must give their children strong moral guidelines. They can start with the Ten Commandments. The golden rule is a good one, too, and in danger of being abolished in our state and society at the moment, though as true as it ever was. Someone needs to remind people*

Engaging the community

A large number of responses commented on the need for communities to be involved in bringing up children. The maxim 'it takes a village to raise a child' was quoted frequently, emphasizing the broader context that is necessary for healthy parenting:

- *It takes a village to raise a child. There's far too much pressure on parents to live up to some idealised notion of 'childhood'. And too much pressure on young people to live up to some idealised version of who they are*



- *It takes a whole village to bring up a child- the model of sharing possessions and sacrificial giving seen in scripture should underpin the support friends and neighbours offer to young families and can be so fulfilling for all the generations as they help each other meet each other's needs*
- *Family is not defined by blood and it takes a village, a community, to raise a child. Being loved and cared for is the most important thing any child needs and this can be given by anyone and everyone, it is not the sole duty of those who share genetic material*
- *The Christian scriptures and history don't support a nuclear view of the family, but a much wider household and community view, and it would be hugely helpful to draw more on this. It takes a village to raise a child. Parenting needs to be seen as much wider than just about biological parenting. Discussion of God as mother (using the imagery from the Bible and from the medieval mystics) as well as father could help us both see parenting as something hugely important but also as something much bigger than we can individually manage*
- *I like the story of Moses - relationship between adoptive/birth mother demonstrates need for multiple influence points and a community that supports children*
- *All faiths should acknowledge the role of both parents more. Whereas a female's ability to birth a child is indeed almost miraculous, the role of both parents in a child's life is vital. Children benefit from a village around them and everyone should be encouraged to be involved (parents, grandparents, family friends) if appropriate. Mothers need support from partners too*
- *Parents need support from others within a community - ultimately it is the parent's responsibility to bring their child up, but we need to be a community, where the adults listen to, and respect children. I think the church could learn a lot from Jesus' example of taking time to sit with the children and bless them. As a society, we're keen to tell children what they need to do, rather than just spending time with them, in their space*

Some respondents equated the church as the 'village' which can support parents in their task:

- *The truth of Deuteronomy 6:4-9. The value of church as a community walking daily alongside each other with core values to nurture and support and challenge and encourage each other*
- *Parents have responsibility to care for their children, physically, emotionally and spiritually. This is a calling primarily on both parents to dedicate time, energy and resources to the role of parenting. However parenting can also include wider family*



and others in the community. Churches and worshipping communities have an important role, often neglected, in caring for children and in supporting parents and grandparents as they endeavour to bring up their children to flourish

- *The responsibility parents have, Jesus loves children, that church can be “the village”*

Recognising difference

A few respondents acknowledged that families come in all shapes and sizes and that parenting styles vary, not least between different cultures, and when children have special needs:

- *We have to recognise the variety in parenting styles and needs. There is no one way and often parents of children with autism, ADHD and other additional needs are expected to parent the 'super nanny' way and in fact their children need a very personalised approach. We need to stop putting pressure on parents but gently guide them to what works with their children. Care for The Family do some excellent resources about parenting ADHD and Autistic children. These could be adopted by every church family worker as they are on the front line*
- *That there is no perfect family model. That children should be valued, respected and kept safe*
- *There is no one model from the Bible but Jesus is clear that children are valued and blessed and should be permitted to come to him; in addition throughout the Bible orphans must be cared for*

Summary

The answers to this question were rich and varied but all recognised the need to help children to flourish and the critical role parents play in that task. While there was scepticism from quite a number of respondents as to just how helpful the Bible and scriptures are, many others pointed to the ways in which the scriptures inform parenting. There was a considerable degree of realism about the enormity of the parenting task and the need to recognise that one size does not fit all. Several people commented on the fact that we were asking some difficult questions in the Call for Evidence:

- *Difficult question as all families are very different and one size doesn't fit all*



- *All of these questions are gigantic – far beyond what can easily be responded to in the small grey boxes of an online questionnaire. But, to try to offer a hasty summary, I'd say that parenting is one particular form of loving into freedom. I'd caution against thinking that it comes in one particular form. Parenting is a matter for networks of adults and older children in relation to younger children, and it is a bad mistake to assume that the 'norm' is a mum and a dad with their kids. Again, scripture and tradition show us many, many more models than that, and we see even greater variety in the world around us. If the church is serious about supporting parenting, it will need to think about the role of grandparents, aunts and uncles, older siblings, and other family members; it will need to think about single parents; it will need to think about parenting shared between adults now separated or divorced; it will need to think about adoption and fostering – and try to support all of these without arranging them into a hierarchy of value*

A few people suggested that while the church has a role to play in supporting parenting, it is inevitably limited:

- *That parents are ultimately responsible for providing nurture and positive role models for their children. The passing on of faith from one generation to the next is the duty of each family, yet in our society there seems to be a lot of expectation that the church will carry out this role*
- *The church must support parents in the upbringing of children in the love and ways of Christ, a living faith not just church tradition*

Nevertheless, the scriptures can show the way for parents who also need to draw on secular understanding and knowledge of child development:

- *I think we need to be drawing on secular understandings about child development, the importance of secure attachments, mentalising (being able to reflect on thoughts, feelings and other mental states in ourselves and others), brain development etc. ... these are about "operationalising Love", and how vital this is, so this is not inconsistent with Christian [thinking], however [it] builds much more detail into what is needed*
- *The way God loves us, forgives us, encourages us, gives us hope etc. It shows us how to be perfect parents - we can't achieve perfection, but at least he shows us where to aim!*



One response reminds us that every child is a child of God:

- *The Jewish faith is rooted in time for the family to be blessed – Sabbath, seven key moments where children are blessed going in search of the lost - if a child is lost we must go in search of them. [The] imagery of God as parent - I have called you by name, you are mine*

Theological analysis of Call for Evidence responses undertaken by The Revd Dr Chris Knights, Chaplain to the Bishop of Durham

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