



## Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households

### Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Thirteen

#### *Learning from Christian and other faith traditions about how individuals, families and households 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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,

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

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*



other faiths and scriptures. We have been learning from different perspectives during the evidence-gathering activities.<sup>3</sup>

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. We invited responses from members of all faith groups. In this and the next two Briefings we share the key themes emerging from the responses to these questions.

### **Please list the key principles that can be drawn from Christian and other faith traditions and scriptures that should enable families and households to flourish.**

In Briefing Two we reported on the responses in the Call for Evidence to a question about the characteristics of individual and family flourishing.<sup>4</sup> Here we report on responses to the question about the key principles that can be drawn from faith traditions and scriptures which are relevant to enabling families and households to flourish.

It is clear that the majority of respondents commented from a Christian perspective. We received a large number of responses highlighting a range of principles which can enable families to flourish. There was a very small group of respondents who took the view that no principles can be drawn from the scriptures that could enable families and households to flourish, offering comments such as the following:

- Your god hates you. It is continually inflicting mental and physical harm on its believers. Not sure how that lets people flourish
- There are some good parables in most religious texts, but the nature of the Abrahamic faiths is such that they are detrimental to society

These views were in the minority. A few respondents listed the specific precepts from the New Testament Household Codes, although these responses were also very much in the minority:

- *The husband is the head of the family – the wife should submit to her husband as the husband should submit to the church church - children are a gift from God and therefore sexual union is sacred and its purpose is for creating children rather than about an individual’s sexual pleasure or sexuality. - marriage between a man and a*

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

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/briefing\\_paper\\_two\\_understanding\\_the\\_characteristics\\_of\\_individual\\_and\\_family\\_flourishing.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/briefing_paper_two_understanding_the_characteristics_of_individual_and_family_flourishing.pdf)



woman is the only place for a sexual union because our bodies are sacred and should only be shared with one other and in that union, God's will can be done upon the Earth

- *Fathers should lead their families. Ephesians 5v22-33 - marriage, between one man and one woman, reflects the relationship between Christ and the church. This is the foundation for having kids in a Christian family*
- *The family is founded upon the union and the unity of a man and a woman together. Their love and commitment is a sign of Christ's love in the world, in that they lay down their lives for the other - and also for the stranger, the stranger being many people, including of course children that are born to them, the fruit of their sexual union. St Paul teaches us that this union of men and women is a great mystery and he speaks of Christ and His Church, in Ephesians 5*

Some of the responses also referred to Genesis 2.24:

- For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, and they become one flesh

### **Encouraging qualities and virtues central to flourishing**

The vast majority of responses to this question listed a range of qualities or virtues which are central to flourishing. While love was by far the most frequently mentioned, others included compassion, respect, kindness and forgiveness:

- *Love, compassion and respect*
- *Faith, hope, charity. Kindness. Providing stability in turbulent times in a turbulent world*
- *Love, Joy and Service*
- *Listening, loving, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, justice*
- *Respect, Love, Selflessness, Compassion, Understanding, Faith, Discipline*
- *Unconditional love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, humility and good communication*
- *Unconditional love based on God's love, security based on promises of commitment, forgiveness when things go wrong, boundaries based on principles in God's word*



- *Love - We love others because God first loved us; Forgiveness - Forgive others as Christ has forgiven you; Hope - In what is unseen, not just what is seen - Provision. The Lord will provide for all your needs (emotional, physical, social, financial)*
- *Key principles for families and households to flourish are to love unconditionally with 1 Corinthians 13 4 – 7 as our standard. This means accepting and affirming each other, showing kindness and gentleness, being patient with each other, forgiving each other in humility (knowing we too need forgiveness), providing resources for needs and creating a haven of security for individuals to thrive and reach their potential spiritually, emotionally, physically, mentally and financially. Families and households are a microcosm of church and the wider society. Healthy families make up healthy communities and nations*
- *From my Christian faith: 1. Awareness that we are loved and cared for by the God who is love 2. Commitment to love each other deeply and to seek the well-being of all people. 3. Affirmation of the importance of long term and committed loving relationships in all cases, including those of same sex attraction. 4. Generosity, grace and forgiveness when relationships fail and full support and encouragement as people re-build lives after such a failure*

Many responses referred to the importance of loving one's neighbour:

- *Love your neighbour as yourself. The care for the well-being of the whole, corporate fellowship. The sense of obligation to one another*
- *Love your neighbour as yourself. Turn the other cheek. Pray for your enemies*
- *Loving God and loving neighbours as ourselves. Serving others and sharing what we have. Walking alongside those we meet ... working well together even when we disagree*
- *Love your neighbour as you love yourself. Laying down your lives for the good of others Respecting and accepting the image of God in every human being Accepting and welcoming difference Supporting those who are hungry, homeless, oppressed and without hope*

Some respondents went further and listed the nine qualities identified as the 'Fruit of the Spirit' in Galatians 5:

- *Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, faithfulness and self-control*



- *As Christians we also live in the power of the Holy Spirit, bearing spiritual fruit (Galatians 5); the fruit of the spirit is born out in relationships*
- *By knowing God's love for ourselves we can share that and let it overflow into our family/household life and the lives of those around us. This can enable each of us to develop and thrive as the person God intended us to be. Supporting and helping each other through difficulties, putting others needs first and demonstrating and living out God's ministry that he has called us to, each in his/her own way*
- *Love your neighbour as yourself. By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another ... The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. By knowing God's love for ourselves we can share that and let it overflow into our family/household life and the lives of those around us. This can enable each of us to develop and thrive as the person God intended us to be*

A number of responses emphasised the importance of caring for everyone, especially those in need:

- *Support for the less advantaged and marginalised. Support for anyone in need regardless of faith, culture or background*
- *Prioritising the poor, widow and orphan*
- *Care for the poor, sick, lonely*

### **Acknowledging God as the perfect parent and the example of Jesus**

Quite a few responses highlighted the Christian beliefs that God loves us as a perfect parent. God is love and God values each person:

- *In Jesus, people become adopted into God's family, as His own children. God is the perfect father, modelling parenthood to us through grace, forgiveness, encouragement, correction, servant-heartedness and sacrificial love. Families and individuals flourish when they put each other first, when they 'do to others what you would have them do to you' (Matt 7:12)*
- *We follow the primary example that Jesus himself was born into a human family with brothers and sisters and would have grown up developing those relationships and connections. We also have the primary example of the relations between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Each complementing the other and welcoming us into that intimate connection*



Some referenced the example of Jesus:

- *The character of Jesus models to us how we should behave in our relationships: gentleness, kindness and meekness. Imagine the impact of just those three qualities in action in a family!*

### **Promoting prayer in family life**

A number of responses referred to the importance of prayer and 'contemplative practices' in family life:

- *Honesty, love, caring, patience, understanding, prayer (lots of it!)*
- *Creating a shrine area where a Bible, cross, icon, candle can be kept and where the family can gather to pray together and for each other and the world'*

### **Drawing on the language of covenantal understandings**

A small number of responses drew on the important language of covenant and commitment:

- *Covenant is a key concept – a family can only grow and develop as they recognise their commitment to one-another as a covenant relationship*
- *Concept of covenant relationship - lasting and committed. Mutual love and submission to one another - communal rather than individualistic. Inter-generational respect, support and valuing of one another*

### **Linking family, household and the Church**

A small but significant number of responses spoke to the importance of being part of the Body of Christ/the Church, of the language of adoption being used to describe Christian believers, of the significance of non-biological kinship in the Church, and of the interplay between the 'family' and the 'church' in Christianity:

- *There is an intertwining of "family" and "church" in the Christian tradition. We call each other "brother" and "sister" and there is both paternal and maternal imagery embraced by the original Church leaders such as Paul. We can therefore draw on aspects of church maturity to imagine the flourishing of families and households, e.g. in Ephesians 4 Paul imagines a church with a diversity of gifted members exercising those gifts to that the collective is equipped and cared for etc. towards "maturity in Christ." This can (and should?) be a familial dynamic as well as an ecclesial one.*





- *Families, just like individuals, struggle with both suffering and sin. Even as we enjoy the blessings of family, we can find that family is also capable of causing profound sorrow and significant pain*

## Summary

The responses to this question overwhelmingly spoke of love as a key principle to be drawn from scripture, and putting the needs of others first:

- *Love! Love one another. Love your neighbour. Love your enemy. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Sort things out before they fester. Children, honour parents. Parents, do not frustrate children. Care for the widow and the orphan. Put God first. Teach children the ways of The Lord*
- *Healthy families are those that are able to love unconditionally, show kindness, provide resources for needs and create a haven of security for individuals to thrive and reach their potential spiritually, emotionally, physically, mentally and financially.*
- *The principle of putting the needs of others first, that whilst we look after the needs of each other in the family, we also look outwards towards the wider community too. The fact that we have a hope, and that we have a God who knows us, loves us better than we can ever love each other and who has plans for us*

Alongside love, other principles or virtues included listening, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, justice, respect, selflessness and compassion. Many respondents drew directly from Bible texts:

- *One key theological concept relating to human flourishing comes in the form of Christ's liberative action and his ministerial life and vision. John 10:10 summarises this principle well when Jesus says, 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.' This flourishing takes a spiritual dimension, but also a practical and physical one. In his life and work Jesus attended to the literal needs of those around him, feeding them, healing them, and creating relationships with him. Importantly, this revelation was relational and occurred in the form of a human being that became man and dwelled amongst us. Human flourishing exists in the context of relationships, those centred on flourishing and justice*

Some people questioned the relevance of scriptures in today's society while indicating how scripture can assist us in thinking about different kinds of family and recognising dysfunctional family dynamics:

- *The Christian scriptures don't really give much support to our contemporary understanding of family and household flourishing, having been written in particular patriarchal contexts. They do though - think of Genesis - use dysfunctional family*



*dynamics as examples of national, tribal and cultural dysfunctions - so they are more helpful on what is not ideal than on what is! The New Testament and early church/monastic traditions give us plenty of resources to think of family as much wider than simply the western nuclear family model - community, church, chosen family, all that imagery of being adopted into Gods family. The idea that we are not independent but interdependent is hugely important, as is the rejection of any sense that being married or having children is a superior vocation, faith in Jesus and wanting to follow in his footsteps causes us to treat people with dignity and love as every human being is made in the image of God*

- *Scripture shows God loving and working through many different types of families not just one stereotype. Loving like Christ does is the model for healthy relationships*
- *There needs to be a serious look at Christian teaching around family in the Anglican tradition. It feels like it is stuck in the 1950s (in an unhelpful way). The assumption is that only heterosexual couples with children are a valid form of family. This overlooks the connections we have that bridge biological ties. It's a shame, as the Christian tradition (especially Paul) has a lot to say about non-biological kinship and the place of single people, those without children*
- *There is no ideal family shape or size; there are large families in the Bible - it seems the Holy Family had several children in the end but Jesus was single and shared his life with his friends*

Respondents from other faith traditions also offered a framework for human flourishing:

- *Islam is a way of life rather than a framework of rituals religiously observed. The Holy Qur'an is believed by Muslims as a divine revelation to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) for the betterment of humanity at large. The keen observation of the Holy prophet's private and public life by his followers and others over a period of 23 years provide us a code of conduct and examples of good practice relevant to private family life and wider communal interactions. These two scriptural sources known as The Qur'an and Sunnah were preserved during the prophet's lifetime and have remained intact throughout their transmission to generations that followed right up to modern day. Aligning our daily practices to the Qur'an and Sunnah faithfully enables individuals, families and households to flourish*

One respondent commented that

- *There has been broad, unacknowledged agreement between different faiths for centuries as to key principles etc. Honesty, humility etc. virtues we (perhaps rightly) consider primordially Christian are virtues in any culture*





## In what ways does your faith inform how individuals who are single should be supported to flourish?

Having asked about the principles drawn from scriptures that enable families and households to flourish, the Call for Evidence asked how faith informs us about supporting single people to flourish. The majority of respondents referred to singleness as a status that includes people who have never been married/partnered and those who find themselves alone through divorce, widowhood and relationship breakup. Respondents acknowledged that some people choose to remain single, while others are single as a result of a particular circumstance in their lives or because they have not yet met a life-partner. The overwhelming consensus in the answers was that everyone, whether single or not, should be valued and supported to flourish within church and faith communities.

### Finding identity in God

A significant number of responses assert the fundamental equality and full humanity of people, whatever their relationship status, by virtue of their common creation by God:

- *Everyone is a child of God and therefore valued and respected; encouraged to find their gifts in life that they can share with the community*
- *Our identity and worth do not lie in our relationship to a marriage partner, they lie in our relationship with God*
- *We can do no better than draw on Christ himself - within the context of a gate into the safety of a sheepfold, and as a Good Shepherd, said that he has come that they may have life, and have it to the full. This is not material, but relational and spiritual abundance. There's a depth of theology that needs to be tapped into, but here we see a purpose of Christ, which we should see as right for all. For those living a single life within the Christian faith means others in the church family are particularly beholden to encourage - and not discourage them*
- *All are equally valued by God, in a society that tends to be geared towards couples and there can be pressure to be in a romantic relationship*
- *Everyone is a child of God and therefore valued and respected; encouraged to find their gifts in life that they can share with the community*
- *I believe we are all made in the image of God, and this is where we best find our identity and where our heart is truly home*



## Learning from the Bible's depiction of being single

A large number of responses referred to the learning within the Bible about being single. Many drew attention to the fact that both Jesus and Paul were single and were able to flourish:

- *Jesus was single. Marriage is not salvation. In a sex-obsessed culture we have to work hard to remind single people that they don't need a sexual partner to be whole. Jesus didn't need one. Plenty of Christians through the decades have thrived without one. The Psalmist says 'He sets the lonely in families'. What the world seeks in another body, sexually, the single Christian finds in the body of Christ, His church*
- *Jesus never married. The church, however, focuses on 'family' 'the church family', and drives single people away. We need to shift our discourse to an understanding of intentional community founded on God's agape for all*
- *Jesus was single and flourished in the community of his disciples and followers. The church should value singleness more than it seems to. The Bible gives little basis for holding marriage as the relationship people should aspire to*
- *Singleness is a good state when it is chosen - Jesus, Paul and many others in the Bible were single. Many in our church history have remained single to enable them to be whole-hearted for God. Single people are valuable in themselves, loved and chosen by God*
- *The example of the apostle Paul and how he lived a full life being single and serving God shows that not everyone needs to be with another person intimately*
- *Jesus was unmarried. St Paul recommended the single life*
- *St Paul said being single is a blessing! It would be good to preach on that mor*

Some respondents pointed out that being single must not be seen as 'second-best', and that family is more than being connected through blood relationships:

- *My faith says single men and women should be as valued in their own rights as married people. Single isn't second best, whether it is an active choice or happenstance. My faith reminds me that Jesus, the only perfect human, remained single yet died completely fulfilled*



- *Although being single can be a blessing, it can be very hard and very painful, that should never be ignored, and so we need to take especial care that single people are not left alone and isolated, nor made to feel second class*
- *Individuals must be supported if they choose to live lives singly, and not be made to feel 'lesser citizens' if they choose not to have a partner.*
- *We believe that Jesus teaches about family being more than your biological family: Mark 3: 31-35. Whoever does God's will is my brother, sister and mother. Family relationships are so very important but those relationships are intended to extend past the nuclear family, giving space for singles to belong in broader family relationships, (committed long-term bonds that give security and last through life's challenges.) Singleness is not inferior to marriage, both are a gift. Our culture and the church can idolise romantic relationships and marriage, making those who aren't in one feel inferior*
- *Paul says be single if you can, but the church is not great at supporting single people. The church often conveys an expectation of marriage which is not so present in society or in the Bible. Faith groups should be a place where single people find a sense of family*
- *Individuals are an integral part of a family regardless of whether they are married or unmarried. The value of a single person is not to be deemed different to any other person as our religious teachings inform us not to be judgemental of others by their status or other irrelevant characteristics. Each individual is a valuable part of society and should be supported to flourish. The fact that a person is single though choice or circumstance such as death of partner, divorce or separation should not have a bearing on how they are to be treated*

## **Responding to and supporting singleness**

A number of respondents were of the view that there is too much focus on marriage and family in the church community and that this is unhelpful, especially as increasing numbers of people are choosing to remain single. Moreover, a substantial number of respondents indicated that, in their view, churches and faith groups fail to welcome, value and support single people as much as they should:

- *Everyone has value. The church isn't great at supporting those who are single to flourish*



- *Those who are single should be supported to discover and pursue their strengths, develop strong godly character and faith, and find their purpose independent of finding a life partner. We should remove the pressure/ expectation especially in the church that they are merely existing until they find a partner and encourage them to pursue excellence in service either way. If they are hoping to find a life-partner, learning to flourish as a single individual is an essential pre-cursor to flourishing well as a couple, so we must encourage and support them to be single well. That way, they can live a full life, affirmed in their singleness, knowing God made them uniquely the way they are, on purpose for a purpose*
- *I don't see families as necessarily the "gold standard" as there can be all sorts of difficulties and toxicity within the family unit. People who are single are so for many reasons, and should be met as individuals, with their own needs and wishes. A Christian or Conservative over-emphasis on "the family" seems to me more of "myth" which can feel exclusionary to the many who are not in that apparently "perfect" situation, which is so often not that anyway. What all people need is opportunities for connection. Church can be one regular opportunity for this, but can also often not get that right*
- *The Christian faith seems to me to overemphasise marriage (and child bearing) as the desirable norm*
- *Fellow Christians are brothers and sisters, so we should look for ways to support those who are single. Find ways to include them in (social) activities without them feeling separate because they are unmarried*
- *I am a 'cradle-Christian' and understand the emphasis that is placed on marriage and family, but find very little encouragement for those who are single. I don't feel judged for being single, but do feel overlooked quite frequently by the Church as an institution*
- *St Paul mentions on more than one occasion that not all are called to marriage. Our society and our churches of all denominations could do so much more to acknowledge this group, particularly as they age. Loneliness for them can be an overbearing burden, and COVID has accentuated this*
- *As a married couple we were welcomed to everything. As a widow, I have to be very careful not to give the impression that I am "after" another woman's husband. I feel alone at every event, I have to ask to join other people - then there is an odd number....*



- *The Bible talks about the value of those who are single and doesn't laud marriage as the goal or even the best way to do life. It talks of the value of the contribution of single people and how they can serve God with fewer distractions. But the Bible also talks about taking care of the lonely or the widow, making sure they are not struggling, and talks of the value of the community of Christ for looking after each other. I believe the church needs to realign its attitude and actions in relation to single people to avoid marriage being the default in words/examples/leadership models, and to wholeheartedly welcome single people to be part of families - not just as friends but deeper*
- *My faith leads me to be deeply committed to the flourishing of all single people (a huge group who are often marginalised in the church). The excessive focus on so-called "family-life" in elements of the evangelical tradition is a real threat here*
- *All are equally valued by God, in a society that tends to be geared towards couples and there can be pressure to be in a romantic relationship*
- *In this strongly individualistic age the single life can be very lonely. The Church can and should provide a safe, chaste, as well as warm and welcoming place for single people to discover and use their God given gifts in God's service*

## **Supporting young people**

Some respondents focused on the support that should be given to young people:

- *Church should do more to support young people. They are more isolated than ever before. What happened to youth clubs and youth leaders? Young males from single parent families often lack positive male role models. Youths should be educated about positive boundaries and to respect each other. Male violence against girls and women must be addressed*
- *Churches are a particularly lonely and hostile place for young single women*
- *Singleness is something within the Church (as in the wider Church as a whole) that we can get wrong and make people feel quite isolated for not being married, especially because there is a pressure to do this so young. It would be great to have as many talks on singleness as we do marriage, as God has different plans for us all and actually it is the Church as a construct that has created this idea that to get married young is the norm, and as a young person who is nearly 22, I defiantly feel already old for still being single*





## Summary

The answers to this question emphasised the need to value singleness and for the church to do more to support those who are single. A few suggested that the church has done harm by viewing singleness as an inferior state or as one where people can be expected to give more time:

- *Great harm has been done by the church...suggesting that being single is a temporary or inferior state*
- *Great harm has been done by the church assuming that single people have infinite time and energy to give to the church*

A key theme emerging from the responses was that the church and faith groups should openly celebrate singleness:

- *The Chemin Neuf models both single person and celibate person flourishing very powerfully, by celebrating the value of different relational statuses*
- *A choice to be single and celibate should be celebrated within the church, rather than stigmatised, bearing in mind that both Jesus and St Paul were single. Maybe we could introduce a rite of passage, within churches, to mark someone's decision to remain single. Perhaps we could direct the focus of such a rite of passage, to celebrate where single people decide to channel their energy, if they choose to remain single (as with ordination of priests)*
- *In 1 Corinthians 7, singleness is described as being "better" than marriage, in that you are less "divided" in your interests. We should celebrate godly people who are single, and serving in more ways than a married person could! There are different opportunities as a single person*

There is recognition within the responses that more can be done:

- *There is so much more that we need to do on this, particularly around people who are single, and how we seek to understand sensitively the best ways to support them*
- *Within the church we should make sure that single people (including single parents) know that they are part of God's family too and we should work together to support one another*





## What can be learned from Christian and other faith traditions and scriptures about friendship and how to support friendships to flourish?

The scriptures place emphasis on the importance of friendship and so we asked respondents to the Call for Evidence to share their learning from faith traditions and scriptures about how friendships can be supported to flourish. Many examples of strong friendships were given from both the Old and New Testaments, and many people referred to the qualities and values that are important for friendships to be able to flourish. Here we report the key themes to emerge from the responses.

### Learning from the Bible

Very many respondents referred to a number of strong friendships in the Bible, particularly those of Jesus and his disciples:

- *Jesus said 'and now I call you friends'. Our friendship with God shapes our friendship with each other. If we have no time for friends, we will have no friends*
- *Jesus and his friends/disciples are a great example of friendship. His loss of Lazarus shows us a very human side of Jesus - friends really matter. The Samaritan helped a stranger. You can have misunderstandings and still be friends. You learn that forgiveness is not weakness - Doubting Thomas was not rejected by Jesus*
- *Jesus chose 12 friends, so models good friendship*
- *The gospels portray Jesus as someone whose primary relationships were with his friends, more so than his family. Acts and the epistles likewise show us an early church, building friendships across gender and social divides. An effective church should have something in common with this*
- *There are great biblical examples of strong friendships e.g. Jonathan and David. They can be a great source of support, encouragement and help us to flourish. To enable friendships to flourish, people need to have time to spend time with each other and to be able to offer time to support when it is needed*
- *Jesus taught us to love one another, take time to understand how friends are feeling, put yourself in their shoes*



- *So much scripture reveals the beauty and blessings of friendship. David and Jonathan, Ruth's friendship with Naomi, the love and support shown to Paul, by Barnabas and Titus*

Other responses spoke of the teaching about friendship within the Bible:

- *Friendship is of course very much at the heart of the Christian faith - Christ calls His disciples friends! Christian friendships are oriented towards laying down one's life for our friends. Again they are not individualistically focussed, but focussed on the good of others. It will be a huge help for those who have friends to understand their role as friends as laying down their lives for the other, rather than expecting the other to meet their needs, whatever they may be*
- *Christian teaching encourages friendship and was modelled by Jesus sending disciples out in two's, and we see Paul supported by Christian brothers in his ministry. As in family relationships, friendships are based on Christian teaching of respect for all and a belief that all are equal in God's eyes*
- *The bible teaches that a friend loves at all times, that iron sharpens iron and that two travelling together are better than one because they can help each other along the way. Genuine friendships keep us growing and thriving and achieving more of our potential*
- *There are many Biblical examples of supportive, loving friendships. Friendship, however, goes beyond just being with those in "my bubble". Jesus showed by his life and actions, and in his teaching (e.g. the Good Samaritan) that we should reach out to, support and befriend those who are very different to us*
- *Friendship should be cherished as it binds people and supports good mental health. David's friend was Jonathan and their friendship transcended the difficulties and death. Friendship is based on love and caring*
- *There are plenty of Scriptures about the importance of friendship - Moses' friends holding him up; David and Jonathan; Jesus' wider group of followers, then His twelve more intimate followers, then His three closest friends. This teaches me that isolation is not ideal and that togetherness should be facilitated, enabling people to maintain friendships*
- *Friendship is massively important in Christianity. It would be great to speak more about friendship and less about discipleship in relation to Jesus and the disciples. 'I call you friends'*



- *The Christian tradition speaks not only of fraternity ("brothers and sisters") within the "family of God", but also of a shared humanity with others - irrespective of their faith or beliefs. Our willingness to not only be friendly, but actual 'friends' is rooted in this sense of shared humanity*
- *The Bible says it best: Proverbs 18:24 "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." We should do it all in love*

## **Understanding different types of friendships**

A number of people talked about there being different types of friendships and the importance of reciprocity in relationships:

- *As we work with people with all different kinds of additional needs, one thing we have learned from Jesus in the scriptures is that friendship is a two way thing. We often think that people with disabilities need befriending, or need caring for (othering), but we miss the fact that they have an enormous capacity to be and offer friendship as equals. We need to understand cultural differences and other differences in the way people show and develop friendships*
- *Friendship is important: Proverbs 18:24, Proverbs 27:17 and Ecclesiastes 4:9-10. Friendship requires the investment of time and cannot be one-sided. Friendship should be faithful so that one is a friend in tough times as well as good times*
- *The need for protected time and respect for friendships as important as family relationships, particularly for those who are single; even Jesus had his friends in Martha, Mary and Lazarus as well as the disciples*
- *Don't assume 'friendship' is one thing: the pictures of friendship provided in the Bible and in the Christian tradition are hugely varied, and no one definition will cover them all ... Look around attentively to see the many different kinds of friendship that do exist, that are valued, and that do flourish. And because they are so varied, don't think that supporting friendship can be a one-size-fits-all programme. So step one is paying attention to the kinds of friendship that do exist. Step two is asking what might support them and enable them to be real for more people – what provisions of spaces, resources, time might give them more space to grow. That's a matter of local attention and discernment.*



## Recognising friendship as a gift

Some responses emphasised that friendship should be seen as a gift:

- *Friendships are a precious gift. When Jesus rose again he returned to his closest friends and disciples. If friendships are that important to Jesus they are surely important for us!*
- *Friendship is a gift which must be cultivated and may be demanding ... In its best form it can express some of the friendship and love God offers us*
- *Loving friendships in community are a deep blessing*
- *Friendship is a gift. Importance of loyalty, acceptance, faithfulness, forgiveness and how to resolve arguments*
- *David and Jonathan, the disciples including “the one who Jesus loved,” Paul’s friends and travelling companions. Friendship is a gift and a best friend is a precious blessing. Friendships flourish when given time and space, with communication. Trips away or meals out, gathering in our houses or climbing mountains. Friendships flourish one-to-one and within groups. And friends can fall out. And forgive. And grow to be deeply enriching relationships*

## Connecting deeply, giving time and valuing friends

In addition to regarding friendship as a gift, several people talked about the need to connect deeply with others, to value friendship, to be open and to trust. Many referred to a sense of service:

- *Understanding friendships and relationships by loving God first and seeing them flourish by loving others as ourselves. Commitment to serving other people*
- *It's about being open to talking about struggles, but also seeing the good in different situations. Friendships flourish when we speak truth, build each other up and connect more deeply*
- *Friendships should be mutually respectful; there should be truth, honesty and openness; and there should be purpose in life to serve one’s fellow humans*
- *Churches can provide one forum for friendships and connection. The Love of God for each of us is the model for valuing each person, rather than an excluding culture*



- *[Friendships are] intergenerational and priceless, to be valued, treasured and invested in. Life-giving, whether life-long or transient*
- *Friendships are important - supporting each other and showing love (agape) is a sign of the value and respect we have for each*
- *Jesus' disciples were his closest friends. These were deep relationships where much was shared - there was honesty and vulnerability, and support. But Jesus also welcomed everyone ... He of course shared some things and time only with those closest friendships, but his offer of welcome and friendship was wider and didn't hold exclusions*

Some respondents talked about the need to spend time with friends, to be able to listen and find opportunities for emotional connectedness:

- *We need to learn to 'spend time' with people and in the wilderness, as Jesus did, rather than always trying to 'save time' for making and spending money. This spending time together happens in other cultures, but in Western culture, to spend time together with others (outside our immediate family) is often synonymous with 'wasting time' ...*
- *Christian faith values and respects friendship, from David and Jonathan, to Jesus and the disciples. God calls us friends (John 15: 15) so this is a relationship of significance in the Christian faith. Friendships need commitment and time. They need opportunities for emotional connection, as well as space. They need appropriate boundaries. They need good listening and communication skills. They will need times to resolve conflict and also ability to offer and receive forgiveness*
- *There is a friend who is closer than a brother. The Lord provides peers who can journey in our lives as people with mutual life experiences. Having a common ground in a friendship helps it to flourish - be it a common heritage, a common education, a common hobby, a common church... the list is endless. However, good friendships allow for and thrive in difference*
- *Friendship and companionship are really important and no one should be isolated within our society. Jesus had an inner circle of friends, and everyone should be encouraged to talk to a few people, to support them*



## Encouraging qualities and virtues central to flourishing

A number of respondents listed different qualities and virtues which they regard as central to friendships being able to flourish. These resembled those that were listed in response to the first question in this Briefing relating to the flourishing of families and households:

- *Loving each other. Supporting. Rejoicing when others rejoice and weeping with them when they weep*
- *Tolerance, listening. Offering support*
- *Honesty, love, compassion*
- *Loyalty, kindness*
- *Friendships must be based on trust and forgiveness if they are to flourish. My faith tells me that Christ will always forgive*
- *Giving without expecting to receive. Sharing the little you have*
- *Encouraging each other and building each other up. Being there for each other*
- *All faiths must teach principles that deepen friendships beyond those in the secular sphere, otherwise they would not grow and exist. The importance of loyalty and shared trust are two of the fundamentals of good relationships*
- *To show humility and compassion, worship and fellowship with other and promote positive friendship. We are created by God equal, love each as God loves us. Offer help and support friends in times of need. Promote and engage in discussion with grace, gentleness and kindness. Encourage openness and transparency in friendship. When there are division and disagreement, promote and focus on unity and how we work positively with one another and that we are accountable to God*
- *The Christian faith shows very strongly the value of friendship (and indeed a sense of brother/sisterhood for those of shared faith). Values of commitment, love, and seeking the best for others underpin this*
- *Supporting friendships to thrive includes helping people develop the qualities of being a great friend - he that would have friends must first show himself friendly. This means qualities that demonstrate the fruit of the spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control - so that they can be the friend they*





want to have. Fundamental skills in learning to do relationships well is vital for friendships to flourish - like understanding differences and managing conflict well

- *Successful friendships – as with all successful relationships – have one key element in common. They are intentional. Love is intentional. Jesus describes his relationship with his followers as ‘you are my friends’. Jesus is intentional in remaining friends with us. He pursues us even when we walk away or blow it. That is the ideal model of friendship*

### **Challenging assumptions about friendships being perfect**

A few respondents commented on the importance of valuing all kinds of friendships and of not making assumptions that they have to be perfect or sexual in order to be satisfying:

- *If there is a perception of cliques and not being good enough or being different to an assumed norm, that can be negative. Jesus had the disciples, who could be interpreted as friends although they weren't all perfect. There are a number of examples where friendships have problems/challenges, although it didn't always mean the relationship didn't survive. God loves us all*
- *Friendship is something precious as we see with friends like David and Jonathan. Today everyone assumes a relationship has to be sexual, which is wrong*
- *There are lots of really helpful positive examples of fellowship, friendship and non-traditional networks. The church should highlight these more proactively and promote them as a rich and valuable way of humans coexisting. Sometimes it feels like the church idolises marriage*
- *Friendship is another crucible for learning to love. It should not be a "second class" version of family. The Church should push back against any fetishisation of biological and indeed legal ties*

### **Summary**

The responses to this question were rich and varied, and they drew heavily on learning from the scriptures. There is consensus that friendships are a very important component of human flourishing and, as such, should be valued and treasured. There was recognition that all faiths promote family life and the centrality of belonging and acceptance:

- *All religions promote family life. The Christian faith is based on all belonging to the family of God and should be accepting supportive and inclusive*



- *The gospel is meant to be good news for us all. In terms of other faith traditions, I have friends of different religions, and have found that where there is genuine friendship, then we can have deep conversations about faith without fear of causing offence when we don't agree on certain things*

We received a number of comments that the importance of friendship should be more openly affirmed and talked about within the church and elsewhere:

- *The Bible and church tradition has many stories of the importance of friendship. It would be good to see this affirmed more in church (but not if this is in reality an excuse not to support same sex relationships)*
- *John 15:13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. Sacrificial friendship and loving people for who God made them to be, should be taught in schools and society*
- *There are plenty of examples [of friendship] in the scriptures, but I'm not sure that I've heard much teaching about friendships in church?*
- *A healthy church is one where mutual, honest, open, forgiving and wise relationships are modelled, spoken about and encouraged. Where hope for all brokenness to be redeemed is offered, and where wise care and counsel about what is unhealthy, abusive and coercive in relationships is given. This is especially important for children and young people*
- *Bernard of Clairvaux has plenty to say about friendship and there are so many examples in the Bible, though we rarely discuss them in comparison with marriage. I think we ought to be more direct about valuing friendship*

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

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