



Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households

Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Fifteen Final Thoughts

Helping families and households of all shapes and sizes and from different cultural backgrounds to flourish

Context

The Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households was established to articulate and address the pressures and challenges facing families and households in all their diversity, in England today. The aims are to offer practical and deliverable ideas about what enables families and households to flourish as the fundamental nuclei of every community in our society, and to consider what actions the Church of England, alone or in partnership, and the government could take to support families and households.

The Call for Evidence

The Commission launched its Call for Evidence in October 2021 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

The questions in the Call for Evidence were designed to help us understand the pressures facing families and households from a range of viewpoints and personal experiences, and the experiences of organisations working closely with families. We also invited people to tell us about the interventions and the support that can make a positive difference in the lives of young people and adults.

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

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



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, the issues facing children and young people, the lived experiences of changes in family life, household patterns and living arrangements, and the inequalities in our society today.

Throughout the Call for Evidence we have explored how the church and other faith groups and the government are responding to the challenges experienced by households and families, including the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic which has been prevalent during our Commission activities. 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, other faiths and scriptures. We have been learning from different perspectives during the evidence-gathering activities.³

In Briefings Thirteen and Fourteen we reported on the answers to questions about the learning from scriptures relating to how families and households, single people, friendships, couples, parents and children can be supported to flourish. Within the Call for Evidence we also asked two questions about how religious beliefs shape the support provided by the Church of England and other faith groups for individuals, families and households; and about the ways in which religious beliefs and traditions might inhibit or present challenges to the flourishing of families and households. We report on the responses to these two questions in this final briefing.

At the end of the Call for Evidence we invited respondents to tell us how, in their view, families and households of all shapes and sizes and from different cultural backgrounds can be helped to flourish. The final question enabled respondents to offer any information that had not been covered in previous questions. Many people used this as an opportunity to expand on their responses to previous questions while others wrote about issues which had

² *ibid*

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



not arisen during the Call for Evidence but which are relevant to the Commission's enquiries.

We report also on the responses to this invitation in this final briefing, sharing respondents' final thoughts, and focusing primarily on ideas and themes which have not been reported in previous Briefings. These responses, together with the answers to the theology questions, serve to remind the Commission about many of the key themes relevant to its task, the ways in which the church, religious traditions and faith groups can shape the support offered to families and households, and the factors which might challenge their ability to flourish.

Throughout the responses to the Call for Evidence, many people listed a range of activities and interventions that are supporting families and households today. We have been considering these and following up with a number of people to find out more about them during our other evidence-gathering activities. We are enormously grateful to everyone who has contributed to the Commission's work.



In your view, how can religious beliefs shape the support provided by the Church of England and other faith groups for individuals, families and households of all shapes and sizes?

Focusing on love

A very large number of responses to this question focused on love and the view that everyone is loved by God or made in the image of God. Some responses gave a very simple message:

- *Do everything out of love: love your neighbour as yourself*
- *Love all people*
- *Teachings based on love, service, respect and forgiveness can apply to all households*
- *Everything about our faith is based on love, however that love manifests itself*
- *Self-sacrificial love, valuing and meeting the needs of each individual and family*
- *By placing love and respect at the heart of everything*
- *Shape and size doesn't matter if everyone is valued and supported. Loving relationships are key*
- *It is important to be open minded and show unconditional love towards others this is what Jesus taught us*

Other responses were more fulsome in their focus on love:

- *Our Christian beliefs provide the foundation for loving in practical ways, knowing we are all loved recklessly by God, all fallen and broken because of sin and all invited to become part of God's family and experience the transforming work of the cross. This means we can meet and embrace people and households of all shapes and sizes, without judgment and shame, encouraging them in their walk of faith to encounter Jesus for themselves and supporting them spiritually, emotionally and financially to become all God purposed for them to be*
- *All people are made in the image of God. Just as we are diverse and varied, God's love is broad enough, deep enough and forgiving enough for all people. One size does not fit all, nor does it need to. God loves ALL of creation and created beings so too*



does God love all households however diverse they are. God can be known and nurtured in every place, heart and home

- *We are all loved by God and made in His image. Christianity teaches care for the vulnerable and marginalised, and for those in need. The Bible contains lots of examples of different family relationships which we can learn from*
- *Believing in the existence of God is paramount. God is LOVE. God is FATHER. God is BROTHER. God is MERCIFUL. God is POWERFUL. God is PEACE. God is a HEALER. God is a COUNCELLOR. God is the ULTIMATE COMPANION*

One response took the tending of a garden as the metaphor for focusing on helping people to flourish throughout life:

- *If we wish to flourish as human beings and grow into full potential, then we need to tend the soil (the family unit); we need to provide opportunities for careful and safe growth of shoots (early years, toddler groups etc.); we need to fertilise with rich experiences (child and youth); we need to train and trim the plant (young adulthood); and we then hope it will bring future growth and reproductively, shelter and life to others (adult life). Even as the plant comes towards the end of its natural life, it has much to offer and give, most often in the life it has given elsewhere (later life), The Bible is suffused with natural imagery and agrarian metaphor*

Loving and forgiving

Some people recognised that we are all sinners and that it is important to show love and compassion:

- *With love and compassion. Never telling people they are bad. No one is. People can do bad things but everyone has some good in them and it is important we encourage respect and care for all*
- *By remembering that God is love. Remembering that we are not perfect. Remembering that what we say and do can have far reaching consequences: whether good or bad. By encouraging people to think about what they believe and why they believe it and to know that God is with them in the good, the bad and the ugly, and that they are not alone.*
- *Those who have gone away from God's pattern still need to be loved and supported. This needs to be done without condoning sin, but by showing the truth and letting the Holy Spirit lead people to repentance and a new life with God*



- *Jesus embraced the lowest of society, he actively sought out sinners. If HE didn't judge the adulterous, the tax man, the lepers, then why should we??*

Navigating the tension between traditional and other views about marriage and couple relationships

Within the responses there is a clear tension between those that want the church to do more to promote the traditional view of marriage and relationships and those who believe that the church needs to embrace a wider variety of relationships. The following are typical of those that emphasised the more traditional/Biblical view:

- *Western civilisation and the Church have traditionally seen people as individuals within families and wider communities. This is correct. In recent decades we have tended to think that individuals exist only as individuals and to forget what they owe to their families and communities, to their loss, and with possibly fatal consequences for society as a whole. In terms of the rules, the Church should encourage people to formalise their relationships, above all if they have or intend to have children. If they are not committed enough to get married (they don't have to have an expensive wedding), they are not committed enough for children. End of subject. Living together may be acceptable for couples who can't or won't have children. I think the Church would be doing many people a favour if it encouraged sex to be expressed inside marriage Christian marriage means one man and one woman, not two of anything (or three or more) ...*
- *Christian teaching supports marriage between a man and a woman as God designed It - this has the best outcomes for the couple involved and their children. Virtues such as love, commitment, faithfulness are not exclusive to Christianity but very much supported by biblical teaching and Christian tradition*
- *The Church of England needs to have two things: 1) Utter confidence in its own understanding of marriage and families. If we lose our understanding of what marriage and family speaks of in terms of physical, spiritual, and emotional integration, then our support will end up lacking coherence, passion, and it will be impoverished. If we over-emphasise, for instance, nothing but individualism we will have nothing distinctive about us, and we might as well devolve our support to government departments. 2) Utter generosity. We should love and help and be present with anyone and everyone ...*



- *The C of E must stick to the biblical and traditional and orthodox teaching of Christianity, instead of changing it now (after many, many, many years) simply because the world is changing. God does not change*
- *We warmly encourage the Church of England to talk with far greater confidence and authority about the importance of marriage as the foundation of successful families. Yes, this includes acknowledging human failings, that not all marriages are wonderful. However marriage stacks the odds in favour of success*
- *Marriage is ordained by God between a man and a woman for the procreation of children. The world is trying to destroy that belief. We should uphold and support this as the answer to the confusion that the world is in*

On the other hand, there were as many responses that offered a more inclusive view about marriage and couple relationships. The following are typical of these alternative views:

- *We need to recognise that family groups do come in many forms, some of which may conflict with our value systems. However the overarching theme of the Christian faith is one of grace and so we meet people in whatever circumstances with acceptance and love. It is not our role to judge others, instead we point them to Christ and allow God to shape their lives and families*
- *... the Church needs to change its mind-set and policy on LGBTQIA+ and Sex before Marriage issues before getting involved in family issues. ...The damage done by Purity Culture and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ families is abhorrent and not of God ... As it stands, the Church is not a safe voice to speak into families and support them, because of multiple safeguarding risks ...*
- *A wider vision of support should be the norm - not centred around marriages with children. So many (divorcees, widows, the childless, single people, those dating, cohabiting couples, LGBTI+ couples) exist outside this structure and it can often feel isolating if you don't fit that expectation. Welcome for all regardless of their family and personal circumstances; no more sermons about proper Christians having to be married, condemning same sex relationships or single parent families or those who are divorced*
- *We need to be much more inclusive and much more affirming of the very many ways that loving relationships and families can exist and operate*
- *The Church of England seems to be in a very unrealistic space when imagining what families look like. It needs to see and accept blended families, divorced single people and LGBT+ families*



- *I think we have a strong message of hope that we can share with individuals, families and households of all shapes and sizes. One that does that in a way that includes rather than excludes and holds difference in the tension of those bonds of love*
- *We need to hold to the imago dei and the love command, welcoming and including all, understanding that families come in various shapes and sizes, we need to have a willingness to support all groups*
- *Love is the obvious one. To be honest, 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*

Making worship and the church welcoming

A number of respondents commented on the need for the church to be a place of welcome for everyone:

- *I think we need to do more and people can be put off by tradition and not understanding. If we can provide a place for people to just come together we can help more*
- *Images and messages and services and media need to be fully inclusive and represent [the] full range of types of family*
- *Church should be the place of acceptance regardless of who you are, meeting you where you are at*
- *Welcome, acceptance, safe place, refuge, sharing lives together, doing 'with' not 'to', and learning together. Holding out hope*



- *Christianity etc. stresses the importance of supporting all people and thus shapes its support to them*
- *C of E should promote love and compassion. An environment where all are welcomed and can be supported- an open place where problems can be shared and mentoring support offered and targeted support signposted*
- *Be welcoming of all, not restricted to people who share our faith: welcome the stranger, widow, orphan etc. Don't try to make people conform to a particular ideal but support them in making their own decisions about lifestyle. Be proactive in supporting the needy and vulnerable; maintain a healthy trust in God's grace working in unlikely situations*

A number of responses talked about the importance of respecting difference and embracing diversity:

- *A sense of belonging and being welcomed is important. Acknowledging diversity and respecting difference is important. Church can feel like a closed shop and like it is only for white, middle-class people. It can be hard to walk in to a place that feels like that (even with open door policies and welcoming bunting etc.) being a safe space is important*
- *Welcome for all regardless of their family and personal circumstances; no more sermons about proper Christians having to be married, condemning same-sex relationships or single parent families or those who are divorced*
- *Faith Groups and especially the Church of England could set an example by being open to all-comers whilst advocating respect for the individual i.e. not all behaviour is acceptable! Some activities and/or worship could be geared to the needs of particular groups whilst not necessarily excluding others e.g. for those with dementia and their families*
- *The most important [way to support families] is that the church reflects the current diversity of society, is respectful of this and affirming of the diversity*
- *Ensuring inclusivity and listening to all. Developing minds through discussion and openness*
- *By grounding ourselves in a Christian understanding of what it might mean to love one another we can build a community which can support families of all shapes and*



sizes to flourish. Locally churches have often been good at doing this but they need to be supported by the teaching and practice of the worldwide Anglican Community. We need to stop perpetuating the idea that some relationships fall short of being 'good enough' which means some individuals believe they are not 'good enough' to be in church

A few people commented on the need to think about what families believe and why:

- *Acknowledge and listen to families on what their beliefs are if any. Encourage and support them to know more about their Christian faith through welcoming church fellowship, worship, Bible study – use resources and language that is easy to understand the teachings*

Holding families together

A few people spoke about religion being able to hold families together:

- *... studies examining the role of family cohesion have found that religion holds families together. Even in separating families these beliefs help support emotional stability and, even in difficult times, support decision making*
- *Christian belief can bring families together in a world which is hectic. Eat together, pray together, talk together*
- *Accepting we are church and together we are all called to love, respect and celebrate what makes us the same and different and to encourage each other and provide opportunities to act as the family of God in supporting and building each other up*
- *The bible is such a powerful book which shares how to flourish in life. That is why it is key for the church to use its relationship with the state to help influence society for the better*



Recognising the church as family

Some responses recognised the role that the church and faith groups can play as another kind of family:

- *Belonging to a lively church family gives a space where children, young people, single people and couples can share with similar people on a deep level*
- *The metaphor of the church as family can offer support those who feel themselves to be outsiders but want to belong*

Working within communities

Taking the theme of church as a family further, a significant number of respondents referred to the importance of taking faith into the community:

- *By promoting strong communities and the bonds that bind communities together*
- *Go out into the towns and help others, show by example*
- *Relational poverty, in all senses, including family, friendship, and romantic relationships, exists and permeates many of our communities. The Church might support these groups and the formation of meaningful connections through developing and sustaining and, where appropriate, creating new expressions of the community work that serves to alleviate these issues. So for example, community cafes, toddler groups, football clubs. These are all expressions of community that happen in and around churches that serve to alleviate poverty of relationships and are also key in sustaining a richness of identity. It is also the case that many churches are blessed with large buildings which can be used in service of community interests. These can be shared with local groups such that the Church building becomes known as a nuclei of community work and a place where relationships are made and find homes within*
- *At the heart of the Christian faith is 'come to Jesus' and that should be our focus. But we can also show Jesus be going to places where people are. Church buildings are seen as irrelevant to so many unreached families and so the churches that thrive go out and support people where they are. We can be WITH people, not doing 'for' or 'at' people. We also need to have people from all different backgrounds shaping what is done in our communities. Awareness of culture, disability, trauma and mental health are so important in our community these days*
- *Our religious beliefs remind us of God's love for us and for all people and that inspires us to want to reach out and offer support to individuals and families of all*



types. They remind us that God values the significance of each person, he knows us by name, and counts the hair on our heads. God values relationships between us, including family relationships as we see through the Old Testament and the family life portrayed there, warts and all, into the New Testament where we see the beginning of the church as a community of believers dedicated to each other, Acts 2: 42ff, bringing together families, individuals and households into one community. This will lead us to provide support that strengthens relationships through reconciliation, teaching listening and communication skills, developing emotional intelligence and understanding of mental health

- *I would hope (but it is not always the case) that the C of E would provide a positive view of family life... whatever that looks like in my locality and my community, and for all families. My family might look quite traditional (parents and two children) but there are lots in our area who don't look traditional - and a church community can help provide support in the way that a wider family network might do*
- *Looking at Jesus again, the church needs to be out in the community, meeting people where they are, welcoming them in wherever they are and however they come. Not rushing to judge but introducing God, and trusting to the Holy Spirit to change hearts where necessary. The church needs to support parents by building up what is good not focusing on what is wrong. Giving parents teaching tools to help their children where appropriate. But church should be a place where all are welcome*

A few people referred to the role of church schools:

- *The most obvious sphere of influence is actually through our Church schools. Well-delivered relationship or parenting courses on Church premises/sponsored by the Churches may bring non-worshippers within our ambit when Christian views can be explained. Religious beliefs place a value upon families and parents to be supported and equipped to pass on their faith values and practices to their children The daily life and work of Christians living out their faith values at home and in the workplace can be a role model to others*



Living Christian values

Within many of the responses was the suggestion that it is essential to model Christian values, including being non-judgemental:

- *The values that underpin the Christian faith should be shown in all we do and how support and serve individuals. We need to be non-judgemental, inclusive, showing mercy, love and care to all no matter what shape or size of household they come from*
- *Just by modelling best practice and offering support where often society fails. Rather than filling the gaps, being proactive and be seen in the locality to provide respite, advice, practical help and companionship*
- *The values of faith underpin all support for all people. Different household situations should be recognised and not lumped together. More support and opportunities need to be offered to those who are single, especially those for whom this is a long-term position and not just a "between relationships" one. There should be no discrimination in who is offered support but all people should be seen as worthy of receiving the support and opportunities offered, which should be offered from a loving, non-judgemental stance*
- *To show by example how to live with each other and how to react to people. Not to be so caught up with the rituals and politics of the church, to be more active and encouraging. To show love in action*

Understanding differences between faiths and working together

A few people questioned whether all faiths can be treated as being the same but pointed to the value of working together:

- *All faiths should loudly trumpet their core beliefs, not water them down to meet modern culture. This is how Islam (moderate) attracts younger people. They need structure to their lives and what they are to believe in. That structure and support gives people confidence. Helps them shine in the love of God.*
- *[We could be] working together with all Christians and other faiths*
- *[We] could provide a coordinated response from faith groups to the support offered in the community. The preciousness of human life should be a value on which support is offered - the unconditional offer of love and acceptance not based on need or*



poverty but generously offered to everyone. No expectation to attend church on the basis of support offered - freely given, without agenda

Summary

The vast majority of responses to this question were positive about the ways in which religious beliefs can shape the support offered to individuals, families and households. However, just a very few people questioned this:

- *I believe that if we took seriously the ideas of equality, social justice and universal kinship as elucidated in the Bible then we would be in a much better situation. I worry that the Church of England spends too long attempting to protect their own position, their buildings, their social power rather than really engaging on a grass roots level with the relief of poverty and holding those in power to account*
- *Religion is not needed in this area, indeed counter productive*
- *Not sure as it stands that the Church of England would be a good fit for all families*
- *The Church of England needs to build more on the idea that for families to flourish they all need equal opportunities. So often the Church of England has had a very middle-class image which fails to recognise that they are making incorrect basic assumptions about where some families are starting from*

These views were in the minority and the main theme to emerge from this question is the importance of love:

- *Love first*
- *Unconditional love for all, a clear idea of what flourishing looks like should be achievable*



In your experience, in what ways might religious beliefs and traditions inhibit or present challenges to the flourishing of families and households?

Having asked how religious beliefs shape the support offered to families and households to flourish, the Call for Evidence asked about the ways in which religious beliefs and traditions inhibit or present challenges to the flourishing of families and households. This question produced many responses that were sharply critical of religious beliefs and traditions, primarily those associated with English Anglicanism. Only one respondent commented that religious beliefs do not inhibit flourishing. All the others gave reasons why, in their view, they do. We report on those reasons here.

Being legalistic, judgmental, moralistic and over-strict

A large majority of respondents gave reasons why they believe that religious beliefs and traditions are either legalistic, judgemental, moralistic or over-strict in enabling families and households to flourish:

- *Religious beliefs and traditions often become rule-based, restrictive and more concerned about "what is acceptable" rather than being concerned about the flourishing of the individuals involved*
- *Far too strong a sense of passing judgements and moralising*
- *When religious beliefs and traditions become strict rules without grace then this can inhibit families and households. The Christian church promotes a faith which is a personal relationship which is based on love and grace. If some of the Old Testament rules and regulations are declared to be literal traditions that have to be followed then families may not flourish because they are without grace and hard to follow and certainly not acceptable within our culture*
- *Perception of the church as judgemental and harsh*
- *Many people view religious organisations as judgmental and hypocritical, sometimes not without cause. It is not uncommon for leadership in our society, especially as portrayed in the media, to be marked by the use of shame, fear and control. We must be diligent to model a different kind of leadership that is based on the servant-hearted leadership of Christ*



- *There exists in common understanding a conception, rightly founded in many cases, that faith traditions are gatekeepers of traditional family values. This expression is taken to mean that all those that exist outside of the traditional family unit or outside of traditional romantic relationships are not welcome in the church. So for example, those that are divorced, or those that are in same sex partnerships. This is in part due to a very real history of judgement and deep hurt which has been inflicted on groups outside of the normative. Where these stigmas and prejudices exist the Church should dedicate herself to tackling them positively. Where they do not but the stigma remains, much work could be done to heal the relationships that have been broken*
- *Being over-strict, rigid and unloving, disrespectful and domineering can inhibit growth and create resentment and rebellion. There must be a balance*
- *Many families and individuals avoid church because they expect their relationships to be negatively judged. We cannot offer unconditional love and acceptance which might enable households to flourish because they already feel condemned by the churches' teaching*
- *Sense of traditional roles and not fitting into these. Feelings of inadequacy and shame. Being judgemental or perceived as being judgemental*
- *People being judgemental particularly about other people's parenting /children. Saying that children with additional needs just need healing and seeing them as a problem to be solved*
- *Religious organisations can be very judgemental. They insist people 'behave' before asking them to 'belong'. This is the wrong way round*
- *Too much of the judging e.g. of single parents, divorced people, gay people, gets in the way of being able to see people as God does. Where it's literally enshrined in church law, that's probably fatally undermining for those people*

The following response challenged the imagery used by the church which appears to emphasise stereotypical traditional families, and the discrimination that can be felt by families coping with sensitive issues:

- *At the moment, the assumption of a middle-class white church background with 2.3 children is something that needs constantly challenging within the church - last year's Christmas logo with a house depicted a middle-class home for example (not a tower*



block on a council estate) ... sometimes it feels like there hasn't been any joined up thinking about these things. My family is mixed race, and we have experienced racism - the church needs to listen to the voices from within that are calling out that racism, and needs to take it seriously, instead of saying that it doesn't matter, or it wasn't intended that way. And the issue of disability and inclusion is also a big one that the church needs to address better (as a parent of a child with a disability, we are often excluded because the church structure and individuals within the church haven't thought to include us, or feel it is too difficult to include a child like mine, or think we cause too much trouble to others just by being different). And then there is the issue of inclusion for families with parents of the same sex, or single parents, or children being brought up by grandparents... and all the graphics and images and teaching that re-enforce the traditional views are not helpful

Being hung-up on a supposed ideal of family life

In the context of the church being judgmental, many respondents referred to the church as clinging to a supposed religious ideal of family life that is in opposition to all other forms and structures and which inhibits the flourishing of families and households. Many of the responses referred to the challenges faced by couples and families that do not conform to the 'heterosexual norm' of a family or have children:

- *There is still massive homophobia and trans-phobia. The issues are not understood by the church and preaching is often prejudiced... such groups have to search out suitable congregations and cannot guarantee their safety and mental well-being by simply walking into their local parish church*
- *A view that any family unit that differs from a married couple living with their own biological children is somehow second best*
- *Anti LGBTQI+ policies. Too much focus on the nuclear family and not offering proper support for those experiencing breakdown/those who come from broken families. Too much emphasis on the need for children at the pain of those who experience childlessness whether by circumstance or by choice. Not recognising and using a good theology of forgiveness to support those who experience estrangement instead of gas-lighting them into dropping necessary and hard kept boundaries. Christian tradition does not know how to celebrate those who do not marry and have children, and it's deeply painful to be on the outside of that*



- *Mistaken theology can do great damage. For example not allowing a transgender person to express their God given identity because it doesn't match the gender we assigned at their birth. Similarly with sexuality and disability - being told that you are "wrong" because of who you are causes immense damage*
- *Destructive teaching about same sex relationships based on a particular reading of the Bible and historic teaching of the Church can be very inhibiting*
- *Too hung up on heterosexuality. We need to accept that love and families come in many forms*
- *The church's attitude to gay marriage is a major stumbling block in today's society. As is the church's attitude to disability*
- *Where religious beliefs about sexuality (largely non-cisgender, non-heterosexuality) and family forms without married couples or children inhibit flourishing and cause harm or spiritual abuse*
- *The privileging of particular forms of heterosexual love, idealised parenting and relationships (none of which are found in the Bible) all discriminate against those not in such family types and alienates people from church and Christianity. The condemnation of divorce can keep people, usually women, trapped in unhealthy and abusive marriages. The idealisation of perfect marriages can also devalue the promise that marriage is in sickness and health, for richer, for poorer; it can lead to a lack of support and even stigma for people in marriages that do not conform to the ideal*
- *People in same sex relationships or blended families or unmarried families have struggled to be accepted and those who have young people who are questioning their gender and beliefs about sex. Sometimes children are not welcome or are seen but not allowed to be heard, and if families feel judged by the congregation this can be off-putting*
- *By presenting a rigid way for families to exist (or presenting it as aspirational) – i.e. only heterosexual marriage with 2.4 children. By presenting this family structure as the only 'right' way to be or the only way approved by God. Heteronormativity as a default is damaging for many. Families in the form of shared households with housemates who are not married/unrelated are often deemed 'less-than' but can actually be a real place of flourishing and mutual support*



- *Homophobia, transphobia and other judgemental opinions that pretend to be biblical.*

The following responses referred to Jesus' teaching and verses in the New Testament:

- *Religious beliefs and traditions inhibit the flourishing of families and households where they are met with blame and shame because they do not fit into the model of God's ideal - such as single parent households, same sex couples or gender fluid/ transgender individuals. Jesus' example with the woman at the well was that he saw her in all her shame and judgment from society - inferior foreigner, inferior gender and sexually deviant with five husbands and a lover - but he still wanted to hang out with her, show her love and teach her the truth. Then she became the greatest evangelist. Oh that we could learn to love people where they are without fear like Jesus does! ... We are like the Pharisees, afraid of having our purity contaminated, insisting others clean up and become like us before they can be loved by us.... We also inhibit flourishing when we misunderstand scripture - for example around headship and submission - or where we emphasise religious rules and practices over relationship with God and with each other*
- *Genesis 2:24., Ephesians 5:31. Emphasis by the church on verses such as these can inhibit the acceptance and flourishing of same-sex partnerships*
- *Too often the church or those who claim to follow Christianity and the teachings of Christ are short-sighted and narrow-minded, committed to what they see as unshakeable "right" tradition and practice. They are unable to accept or understand other interpretations of scripture or see the validity in others' identities and sense of self, and subsequent expressions of love. This reduces and inhibits people being able to grow into their full potential. Not all people can, or should, have children. Religion too often centres its focus on producing children and passing on the faith and tradition as more important than being fulfilled empowered individuals now. LGBTQ+ individuals and families are too often ostracized and rejected or forced to conform to belong, denying their identities and thus inhibiting their growth and stunting happiness. Too binary in thinking and assumptions ... Commitment to an old ideal has meant the church and/or Christians have not seen the reality of love, and God, around them*

Some other respondents spoke about discrimination that focuses on separation and divorce, disability and choosing to be single:

- *Family separation is a difficulty in many religions and leads to people feeling guilty that they can no longer uphold their vows. Also divorced parents have been inhibited from marrying again in some religions and this has meant leaving the church*



- *Most religions and denominations are ambivalent or hostile to same-sex relationships who may have children and possibly to single parents, especially those who set out to become single parents rather than divorce/separate after becoming parents. I think often they often give greater status to marriage and other intimate relationships rather than to single people*
- *Expecting people to conform to our way of doing things (which may vary between churches (e.g. attitude to chosen single parenting, same sex partnerships) so that people are under pressure to conform to be welcome or supported*
- *... by confusing the gospel with a picture of 'family values' focused on the modern nuclear family. By making anyone who does not fit that picture (single people, gay couples, multigenerational families, and non-Western families) feel second-class or overlooked. By missing the 'freedom' bit out of 'loving into freedom' and so ending up with 'loving into conformity'*
- *A view that any family unit that differs from a married couple living with their own biological children is somehow second best*
- *Many church traditions in this country do not value children, and certainly don't value people with disabilities and additional needs. Generations are not encouraged to worship and learn together in church, despite this being a very biblical model of worship; the voices of children and those with disabilities are rarely heard or valued; children don't get opportunities to be part of services and ultimately don't feel like they belong or have a part to play. It is then no wonder that they leave the church family once they are too old for children/youth groups. There are virtually no role models or leaders with disabilities or additional needs in the church, certainly not in positions of authority or at big Christian festivals and gatherings. The language and inferences used are frequently very able-focused*
- *We walk a tightrope - our hearts long for great successful marriages as this is the closest image and reflection of the Trinity in our lives. Marriage is great and much be encouraged/shouted from the rooftops as much as possible. However our historical positiveness [sic] to marriage has become a negative to everyone else because we haven't gone out of our way to support these people. Divorcees are a group who have been theologically shunned, distanced, pushed out of church jobs and effectively discriminated against in the church. This has been incredibly harmful to individuals as well as to the church as this doesn't show love. This does not have to be the case in the future - if we actively support, speak about and love people in relationship breakdown, find a time for them, come alongside them in their pain and hurt, then the message of the gospel is real and clear. In fact it becomes a strategic moment in*



a person's life. Relationship breakdown is often the biggest crisis in a person's life. This is a fork in the road for people at a critical time. At this moment, when they are in pain and despair, we can come alongside to show love, God's love, and people are hugely receptive. It becomes a moment when they can meet God through the non-judgemental love of Christians and may start and desire to know more about this love. This is the parable of the Good Samaritan in action and is at the heart of our work

The following response emphasised the potential for embarrassment about conversations relating to sensitive sexual issues:

- *Uncomfortability [sic] with discussing sex healthily and demonising sexuality and sensuality, especially that of women, has deeply damaged people*

Opposing societal views

A number of responses pointed to the opposition of society to Christianity and allied with this, the failure of many Christians to be public in their faith:

- *The Christian faith enhances the family It may “feel” inhibiting if and when the surrounding community is opposed to Christianity. In a diverse society, sticking to ones beliefs is a challenge. Religious beliefs can become challenging and inhibiting for families from minorities to integrate with outside community ...*
- *People can be hesitant or shy about their beliefs. In discussions, it is sometimes easier to stay quite than express your religious view*
- *We tend to hold back our religious beliefs (C of E), and it stops fruitfulness as we tend to keep it to ourselves, yet we should be out there saying I belong to the C of E and I believe in Jesus and what he has done for us*

Seeming irrelevant to every-day life today

In addition to the seeming opposition to Christianity, several respondents felt that religious beliefs and faith can seem irrelevant to life today:

- *Unfortunately, beliefs which exclude based on sexuality, or whether someone is divorced, or whether a woman should be able to have an abortion, or whether a woman can hold the same roles as men, present challenges to the flourishing of all.*



They have become so out of step with modern life, and reflect an out-dated patriarchy

- *Prescriptive, judgemental, removed from the reality of life, this does not mean we don't hold to teaching and belief, but we recognise that Jesus was always seeking those on the edges and therefore we too are to love and serve all*
- *As society has changed and adapted the church and its traditions has not always been able to adapt and change at the same pace. Some traditions of the church may feel very alien and irrelevant and put people off joining in with events or supports which may be positive for them. Adapting the types and times of services and styles of services so they are more relevant for families and households who may not have a church background can be very helpful ... The church joining in and contributing to other community events is also an important indicator that we care for our communities*
- *Many religious teachings on things like family and relationships are seen as old-fashioned and out of touch with the reality of people's lives. Holding firm to the ethical stance of one's faith while being open to the experience of others can be hard, especially as the secular media often present a very one-sided picture of what faith communities believe and remove any nuanced picture which recognises that faith communities hold a wide spectrum of views ... Those who oppose faith tend to be polemical about one particular type of faith rather than open to the fact that not every Christian actually recognises the faith against which they rail as the faith they hold themselves*
- *Some churches can be too backward or unmovable in their outlook, and not relevant to modern day mixed families*
- *Old fashioned rules and bureaucracy as well as people who are set in their ways. Slow response to changing times. An unwillingness to be bold and forward thinking*
- *Religion is no longer relevant in many aspects of life and its views and rules on same sex marriages is out of step. Plus the traditions of a physical service is out of date with the digital lives of many and the preference for spending physical time elsewhere*
- *The teachings of the Bible may need to be modernised in this changing society*



- *We are perceived as out of touch. For example same sex marriage, attitudes of priests and congregations in services, of children being seen and not heard. We need to quickly become part of contemporary culture*
- *Outside influences have more sway than the church. There is too much else to do on every day of the week - not just Sundays. Long sermons - long services. Zealots. Fewer clergy seen out & about walking their streets and being seen as normal people. How can the church lead on and help with eco challenges; understand lack of money for some households; the mental debilitation of not having work. Jesus can seem remote and not connected with modern challenges*

An organisation representing family mediators commented as follows:

- *We see religious beliefs being an obstacle to a successful mediation; we have had many Christian clients who are fixated on righteousness, on sin, a goodie parent and a baddie parent. We do not think such a binary attitude is helpful to anyone, not least the poor children of Christian parents, who make the separation process so much more toxic than those with whom we work with no faith. We see righteousness as an obstacle to grace, and profoundly unhelpful in a mediation context. ... When a couple separate, it's sad but it's not the end. Life continues for them and their children in an altered state, and churches and faith leaders should be teaching about peace-making and grace in the context of relationship breakdown. Otherwise, a justice approach is the default here, with all the profoundly unhelpful implications which flow from that for the differently shaped family and their children*

Holding to beliefs and traditions that are not based on God's word

A small number of responses included comments that churches holding to beliefs and traditions that are not based on God's word inhibits families from flourishing:

- *Religious beliefs and traditions which are not based on God's word in the Bible or are unbalanced, legalistic and not based on love and forgiveness will inhibit or present challenges the flourishing of families and households*



Being dull and culturally inappropriate

Other respondents pointed to worship that is dull and traditional and church buildings that are unwelcoming:

- *Traditional church services are culturally inappropriate to most families today. So many activities for children like swimming or football clubs take place on Sundays. We need to find different times and ways of engaging families*
- *Church has added a layer which is not biblical, but historical, created by people. Reducing this layer and reducing our value on old buildings would help. We seem to create old buildings into idols - knock them down and build new ones*
- *Fear of going to church because they may feel that the church and Christians may be an unwelcoming environment for families ... Cold and dull old church buildings ... Families may feel that the sermons are not relatable and fulfilling - therefore not gaining anything from it or it making a difference in their lives*
- *The language in a church service liturgy needs to be more user friendly. Families have to try to meet the needs of their children and compete against other activities in life which can be more attractive than church or having a faith*

Using scripture to justify discriminatory views

A relatively small number of responses spoke of literalist or narrow interpretations of scripture, or of scripture being used to justify discriminatory views or abuse:

- *When scripture is taken out of context to justify discriminatory views and attitudes*
- *In the area of domestic abuse, scripture can be used to justify male dominance and violence, and/or to judge survivors, or inhibit victims from leaving perpetrators*
- *Discrimination against women and people in same sex relationships - deep institutional and liturgical sexism*
- *By selectively reading scripture to reflect our own culture or desires and then adopting a dogmatic and unchanging approach to our evolving society*
- *When we fail to engage meaningfully with scripture it can lead to cherry-picking or misinterpreting God's word in order to reinforce human prejudice. There is also a risk in valuing tradition too highly, especially when we assume that the social norms of the past 200 years reflect tradition accurately. We also need to be very careful of*



how we discuss "issues" when the reality is that for some their very identity and/or family is involved

- *False doctrine, inappropriate and harmful use of Holy Scripture to exercise control*
- *Depending on the way faith is communicated, it can be used as a blunt tool to force obedience and compliance. This will largely depend on how prideful and legalistic leaders are. Self-righteousness should never have ground when looking at how to support families and households*
- *Misogynistic leadership inhibits the flourishing of families and households. It sends out the message that girls are second class citizens. This is something the church itself is guilty of because it promotes boys only choirs which gives places at elite schools to boys only and thus perpetuates the inequalities between girls and boys which carries on into the workplace and into leadership positions in later life*
- *A focus on discipline - disempowerment of women and children, violence and sexual abuse in the name of Biblical submission*
- *It is easy to read the hard line bits from scripture and use them to set rules. It is much harder to demonstrate the Love of God and encourage people to be generous to each other. It takes more effort and it has less selfish 'agency'*

Holding different beliefs and faiths

A small number of respondents pointed to the tensions that can exist in families and households where members are of different faiths, or where some members hold a faith and others are of no-faith:

- *Conflict can arise when people with different beliefs and traditions find themselves in the same family/household. There can be conflict when there are different interpretations of scripture e.g. LGBT issues. Conflict often occurs when a family member loses their faith, but faith is deeply important to other family members*
- *Faith can be interpreted in legalistic ways that result in people imposing demanding and even harsh standards of behaviour on other members of the household, and this can lead to mental health problems including anxiety and depression*



- *Even within the same belief opinions can differ so dramatically, which can be hard when a particular family member thinks that they are defiantly correct, making other people feel they are wrong*
- *If individual family members are not tolerant of others' beliefs, religion can be a dividing, rather than a unifying factor*
- *I have known of people in households who've felt pressured to live up to another person's expectations. I've also known of people making time for their faith commitments, leaving others in the household (perhaps who don't share that faith) feeling put-out*
- *Different views may lead to prejudice or lack of acceptance. Changing attitudes/lifestyles may cause tension/conflict with certain beliefs amongst family members*
- *There may be challenges in households where there are multiple faiths practised or non*
- *Faith is often divisive in couples who do not share each other's values. Special sensitivity needs to be applied when one person shows interest and their partner is sceptical or suspicious*

Summary

This question produced many responses that pointed to ways in which religious beliefs and traditions can inhibit human flourishing. Foremost among the criticisms were those that highlighted various forms of discrimination and a lack of inclusion, particularly of families and relationships that do not conform to more traditional expectations. Concerns were expressed about judgemental attitudes and how these can turn people away from religion, as in the following comments:

- *Too narrow a view of what it means to be a family*
- *Christians can have a tendency to fundamentalism*
- *Religious beliefs can lead to social isolation, stigma or discrimination, especially where we live with plurality and the faith tradition (e.g. the Church of England) is unable to cope with that diversity, creatively and imaginatively*



In order to counter these tendencies some respondents called for greater acceptance and tolerance:

- *We need to be far less prescriptive (either by word or by implied behaviours) of certain patterns of life, and much more open to diversity and grace and love in surprising places*
- *Sometimes we can exclude those who are the most vulnerable and in need of a place to be welcomed and find a sense of family and connection that has been absent in their own upbringing or experience. It is our job to commit time, effort and resources into intentionally developing those ways in which we can create spaces that are safe*
- *The Christian traditions that have grown up have often led to suppression of joyous celebration apart from in the musical history of the church. I would like to see churches filled with light, laughter, music and dance, all to celebrate our joy at the creation so beautifully presented in the nature all around us*
- *COVID-19 has fractured communities but now people are wanting to reconnect and we need to grab this opportunity - we need to move away from a Sunday centric understanding of church and encourage a broadening of our mission within all aspects of community - 'membership' in the church, and how we view this, also need to change to a more welcoming and inclusive one*
- *The belief that children should be seen and not heard stops children from flourishing. The belief that only heterosexual marriage is allowed stops individuals from flourishing because they lose out on the chance to truly Love another the way we are designed to. The idea that we can't remarry after divorce can have seriously damaging affects meaning people stay in dead or damaging or abusive marriages ... And far more needs to be done to support Christian families who have a child or children with special needs. Both supporting them in terms of physical help and community but making them welcome in church, adapting services to meet the needs of everyone and not ostracising anyone regardless of age, gender, disability or sexuality*
- *The church has a history of telling people their family doesn't count. Maybe stop doing that*

One respondent simply commented:

- *I'm tired of the battle tbh [to be honest]*

And another:

- *We make His love too narrow by false limits of our own*



Please add anything else you would like to tell us about how families and households of all shapes and sizes and from different cultural backgrounds can be helped to flourish

The Call for Evidence responses were provided during the last three months of 2021. At that time the COVID-19 vaccination programme was well-advanced and the longer-term consequences of the pandemic were beginning to emerge. Many people reiterated the comments they had provided to earlier questions while some highlighted other factors that they regard as likely to impact on human flourishing. Here we do not repeat the main themes that have been reported in previous briefings but focus on the comments which had not been covered or which were being emphasised as key issues for the Commission to consider as we gathered additional evidence.

Promoting acceptance and inclusivity

One or two responses painted a pessimistic picture of everyday life and the sense that there is little support available for families:

- *There is nothing round here. No one cares one jot about families. Families are only seen as couples with children anyway*

This kind of statement was in the minority but demonstrates the need for greater community awareness and inclusivity.

By far the most dominant theme in the responses was the need for greater acceptance of all individuals and families irrespective of their race, colour, socio-economic status and their living arrangements. The call is clearly for inclusivity and acceptance of difference. The following comments illustrate the range of thoughts we received:

- *In order to support ALL families it helps if one major element of the demographic is not excluded: how can single adult families be supported and encouraged*
- *Emphasis on "community integration" for ALL those who make this country as their home residence. It is very easy to get into a Ghetto mentality...*
- *We need much greater education about colonial histories and the impact that they still have in the world, and also about how poverty and inequality affects people's lives*



- *We need to get back to positive images of multi-cultural Britain. This will be hard in a post Brexit age, when many people are now openly racist to non-British people. EU citizens who have lived in the UK are now made to feel like strangers. Having to apply for settled status in a country where you have made your home for many years is one of the surest ways to 'other' whole sections of our community*
- *Embracing families from different cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Understanding that fundamentally we are all the same and want the best for each other*
- *More support for those whose relationships are not heterosexual or whose relationships are not centred on the desire to have children*
- *Enabling couples to navigate divorce fairly and with dignity can in fact promote the institution of marriage. Anecdotally, we see in practice couples avoiding marriage simply due to a fear of a potential divorce. If nothing else, this demonstrates the need for a much more human, and less blame-ridden, response to two people falling out of love*
- *There needs to be coordinated oversight by the government of provision for families who separate, with proper access for children and young people to see a child consultant and have their views heard. We need a public education campaign, that family breakdown is not a matter for law and justice, that children need their parents throughout childhood whether they are together, separated or divorced; that there are local services to support families in difficulty navigate the choppy waters of separation and help them find a peaceable way forward that puts their child's welfare first. Nothing less than a public education campaign will change society's thinking to a kinder, more peaceable understanding of 'family' when parents live apart. And churches need to speak up too and break their silence on this issue Given that family breakdown is one of the biggest issues facing our society today, if the church wants to be part of any answer to supporting families and/or households, then it must break its silence on this topic and join in constructive approaches to manage separation better. It's time for the church to acknowledge the families who are differently shaped, where parents live apart and are supported in peace-making with the other parent, and where children can be free to thrive during their childhoods*
- *It's not okay for same-sex couples and their kids to be the only people we don't support and affirm in their family life*



Fostering a sense of community

A number of responses referred to the increased sense of community that was engendered during the coronavirus pandemic and the need to harness and foster this ability to support each other:

- *It would be nice if more was done for people on their own, particularly at times like Christmas. Some local cafes/pubs have served lunch on Christmas Day previously and community transport organisations have got people there. It would be nice if there was a way they could join with families*

The following response from the Mothers' Union focused specifically on this theme:

- *We can learn a lot from what happened in lockdown but the sense of community that clearly was in both urban and rural and the sense that 'we are all in this together'. If something good can come out of the pandemic, it is that we all need to work together to support each other. Food and growing things are great levellers and we can use them to bring people together. Befriending, making people feel welcome and able to mix with others without being judged or looked down on. Knowing where to signpost, networking and working in partnership. Providing help with basic living essentials can be key ... Nurturing a non-judgemental, accepting approach to "other", whatever "other" may be. In the Christian tradition, "welcoming the stranger". Provision of "safe spaces"/groups where parents can meet for mutual support ...*

Reducing poverty

Several responses returned to the theme of poverty and the cost-of-living pressures on families, reinforcing the need to meet basic needs in order for individuals to thrive:

- *All the things you'd like to address are closely correlated with poverty. It's hard to be a good partner and a good parent when you don't know where the next meal is coming from. Address that, and watch the numbers plummet*
- *Working families need more help either to not both have to work full time or to fund childcare. I'd like to spend more time with my child to help her flourish rather than rely on school so much*
- *The main stressors for families are rising living costs and stagnant income, plus poor-quality housing. So I hope there will be links with the other Archbishops' Commissions*



Understanding existential threats

A few people referred to the need to understand other threats that impact on human flourishing:

- *People are so stressed and disenfranchised that society is in meltdown. History teaches us that this is how revolutions and civil wars start. Of course the other existential threat that is causing world-wide concerns is the human impact on the planet. The church ought to be doing more to promote hope and positive action to protect the planet*

Summary

Responses to the open-ended question at the end of the Call for Evidence primarily gave people the opportunity to underline the issues they feel strongly about. The main one appears to be the need for much greater acceptance of difference in our society and the belief that the church can play an important role through leading by example. To some extent the answers emphasised the importance of having clear values by which to live, many of which are based on Biblical ideas:

- *The church needs to be supporting families of all shapes and sizes, and without judgement. We need to signpost where appropriate, and provide informal support where we can through church networks and people who live locally*
- *Treat all families with fairness and equality, tailored to their individual needs and requirements. Communicate and listen to the families with respect, dignity, kindness, humility and compassion*
- *More than anything, people need to be affirmed and supported to flourish in the way that is best for them, and in the way that they choose. Speaking and showing love and care and warmth are needed; preaching and "we know best" and judging people are not ever helpful nor needed*



The dominant theme running through the responses to this final question and to many others in the Call for Evidence can be summed up in one word - love:

- *It all comes down to love. We need to regain the Biblical idea of love, loving Jesus and developing all god kinds of love from there. The Church has to live a life of love and get out there with the Good News of love!*

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

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