

**Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households**

On Zoom on Thursday 14 April, 2022 4.00-5.00 pm.

*1. Briefly introduce your organisation, summarising the services you provide and the key issues your clients and beneficiaries bring to you;*

- 1.1. Relate London North West, Hertfordshire, Mid Thames and Buckinghamshire known as Relate North Thames and Chilterns (Relate NTC) is a member of the Relate federation. It is an independent charity which employs 95 people - practitioners and staff - with an income in 2022/22 of £1.3m.
- 1.2. Relate NTC's mission is to support healthy relationships in the communities that it serves. We do this by providing counselling, family mediation and training services, often at low or no cost. We ask people with higher incomes to donate more than the cost of their service so we can support people who cannot afford to pay the full rate.
- 1.3. Most of our work is adult relationship (couple) counselling. We also provide family counselling frequently involving young people as well as specialist psychosexual therapy. We employ 58 sessional counsellors who are all currently working with clients via Zoom. We also provide couple counselling for depression, support for families where a member is recovering from addiction and mentalisation therapy, as part of the Department of Work and Pensions programme to reduce parental conflict.
- 1.4. For several decades Relate NTC has also run a mediation service focusing predominantly on mediation of family disputes arising from separation and divorce. We work with a panel of 7 Family Mediation Council accredited mediators. Relate NTC is contracted to provide Legal Aid to eligible clients. We also offer mediation via national contracts with organisations like the RAF Benevolent Fund.
- 1.5. The key issues that family mediation clients bring to us are:
  - 1.5.1. Disputes about arrangements for their children
  - 1.5.2. Disputes about financial matters arising from separation including division of matrimonial assets such as the family home, pensions, savings, cars, furniture etc.
- 1.6. Additionally Relate NTC runs the NACCC accredited Uxbridge Child Contact Centre staffed on alternate Saturdays by local volunteers.

*2. What steps could the Church of England, other churches and faith groups most usefully take - including exploring radical new pathways - to maximise their support for individuals and couples to flourish whose relationships are or have been in difficulty?*

**Barriers to greater use of Mediation**

- 2.1. The Commission may be aware that the Ministry of Justice has recently published a summary of responses to a call for evidence last October on attitudes to different dispute resolution processes. (Reported in the Law Society Gazette, 31st March 2022). People were asked about drivers and barriers to dispute resolution as well as the quality and outcomes of the approaches used.

- 2.2. A 'high proportion' of respondents (lawyers, mediators, academics and representative bodies) said that parties were not aware of dispute resolution processes and cited a lack of publicly available information to fix this. They asked for **greater public education** with government taking a central role, particularly when it came to helping litigants in person.
- 2.3. The evidence also highlighted a number of misconceptions and unhelpful beliefs around dispute resolution for example:
- Mediation was viewed by many as a token step along the inevitable road to court, and was not seen as a serious route to a solution.
  - Others dismissed mediation in family cases as an attempt to put relationships back together or in general as a 'form of capitulation' which signalled admission or weakness.
  - Mediators' impartiality and independence was questioned, as well as their ability to give advice or impose a decision.
- 2.4. There was a strong association made by parties between the notion of court and justice and ingrained beliefs regarding the need to have one's 'day in court.'
- 2.5. The summary of responses also said that while many were keen to engage in dispute resolution to save money, in some cases the value of a dispute and 'relatively cheap court fees' compared with the cost of alternatives was another barrier.
- 2.6. Some respondents felt that solicitors' vested interests in pursuing lengthy litigation were a barrier to early or regular referral to mediation whilst the 'adversarial language' used by some lawyers was also seen to aggravate tensions between parties and impede engagement with dispute resolution.

### **Promoting new pathways**

- 2.7. The Church of England, other churches and faith groups could take active steps to promote new pathways by proposing, encouraging, modelling and **prioritising consensus based approaches** to managing disputes.
- 2.8. By actively committing to adopting non-adversarial approaches and only considering litigating as a very last resort, mediation and other negotiation based conflict resolution tools could become the norm.
- 2.9. **Dialogue and negotiation is at the core of peaceful coexistence.** The Church and other faith groups could actively promote this approach to couples and individuals as well as equipping them to navigate this challenging journey.
- 2.10. Churches and other places of worship could designate themselves as **peace centres**. They could be made available for mediations at low or no cost.

### *3. What changes in public policy across all areas of government are most needed to support and enable conflicted couple relationships to be resolved in the best interests of each party and any children of the relationship?*

- 3.1. Government needs to develop collaboratively a comprehensive **cross-government relationships strategy** for couples, families and society generally. This strategy should be supported by a Minister for Relationships. Government policies for England and Wales should be subject to a '**relationships test**' as part of this strategy to assess their potential impact on healthy relationships.

- 3.2. All local authorities need to publish **a dedicated relationships strategy** so that couple, family and social relationships are clearly at the core of their local government activities.
  - 3.3. The strategy should cover the provision of information and services, as well as improvements in signposting so that individuals, couples and families can access relationship support when they need it.
  - 3.4. Directors of Public Health should be required to measure the quality of couple, family and social relationships to inform policy and commissioning by local authorities and clinical commissioning groups.
  - 3.5. Services designed to help people at life transition points such as getting married, becoming a parent, separating, divorcing, becoming a carer, retiring or being bereaved should include a focus on couple, family and social relationships, their impact on wellbeing, how to maintain relationship quality and how to manage conflict.
  - 3.6. When couples separated and divorce, Court fees should be geared to provide clear financial benefits to those who engage consistently in negotiation and mediation and disincentives to litigation (unless someone needs protection for abuse and violence)
4. *What practical actions could non-governmental organisations working to enable families to flourish take to increase the effectiveness of their work, including for example:*
- *a greater emphasis on protecting ongoing parental relationships so that children do not lose contact with one of their parents, and to reduce parental conflict;*
  - *Working in partnership with other organisations in complementary fields such as churches and faith groups - among others?*
- 4.1. Non-governmental organisations could work in collaboration by way of local and regional **consortia, partnerships and coalitions**, with the aim of enhance their collective work to enable families to flourish. Interfaith groups could model, and facilitate these collaborations.
  - 4.2. Churches and other faith groups could seek funding for roles for **skilled community activists** who are tasked with promoting and developing local capacity for collaboration and consensus building.
  - 4.3. Church based **peace centres** could supplement the work of the proposed 'family hubs' by providing informal spaces and volunteer support for families especially at points of heightened tension or crisis.

## 5. Author

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