



## A Christian vision of Families and Households

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### Introduction

After 37 years, *Neighbours*, the Australian soap which made us at home on Ramsey Street, came to an end. The theme song spoke of the need for good neighbours - friendly waves, getting to know one another and showing a little understanding. In being there for one another, it went on, neighbours become good friends. Like every soap, it was a blend of families and households.

In the closing monologue, Susan (a central character) talks about the people not the houses - the history, stories, the legacy - and what it meant to become part of a community. She names the diversity of families, those who were lost, and the way friends became family. She acknowledges that life seldom runs smoothly, but expressed the experience of love that somehow brings about the perfect blend of belonging and fulfilled potential.

Life is not a soap-opera. Yet, somehow, the narrative arcs and character developments, reflect what we know and recognise of our life together. There are many factors which shape the way in which we form and sustain our life together as families and households. Some of those influences are religious, cultural, legal or social; others are responses to experiences, behaviours and patterns of life. There are a myriad of ways in which they can be strengthened (e.g. through investment in relationship support) or weakened (e.g. by a lack of early years interventions).

Perhaps one thing that we have come to appreciate as a result of the pandemic - and the introduction of the concept of the “support bubble” - is the importance of cultivating connections between individual households and families. This necessary interdependence of household and family “units” demonstrates the need of a rich description which expresses the quality of life we long for which is “more than” the utilitarian ordering of our life together.



The *Charter of Rights of the Family* was presented by the Holy See to all persons, institutions and authorities concerned with the mission of the family in today's world in October 22, 1983. It describes the family as *more than* a 'juridical, social and economic unit'; rather it constitutes a 'community of love and solidarity' and a 'place where different generations can come together to help one another to grow in human wisdom and to harmonise the rights of individuals with the other demands of social life'.<sup>1</sup>

What follows will explore that notion of 'more than' in relation to the church's concern for, and investment in, families and households before setting out a biblical overview of God's ways with the world from creation to redemption. This allows us to name the "messiness" of reality alongside an ultimate hope.

Firstly, I will introduce the framework used by *Coming Home: Tackling the housing crisis together*.<sup>2</sup> This report is the culmination of the work of the Archbishops' Commission on Housing. In relation to their findings the Commission set out some core values, namely: support, security, stability, sociability and satisfaction - as well as sacrifice. Then I will set out why the Archbishops' Commission on Households and Families is building on this work in the context of its own remit.

Secondly, I will propose ways of inhabiting and examining those concepts through a scriptural overview followed by "snapshots", which might invite us to find something of ourselves in the biblical narrative. This will be followed by a more systematic theological framing of those ideas in relation both to the church, as the household of God and also the public realm, that is the arena of the Kingdom we are called to seek.

### **From Housing to Families and Households**

The church is invested in the life of families and households because these ways of being human in relationship are also part of the economy of God; because to reflect on the nature of human beings made in the image of God takes on individual and collective meaning. Questions of equal dignity and responsibility sit alongside ways of loving and relating from the conjugal to the

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<sup>1</sup> This Charter is available online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va) and sections E and F, cited above, were accessed 16.06.22.

<sup>2</sup> The full report *Coming Home: Tackling the housing crisis together* is available here (the full report and executive summary): <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/archbishops-commissions/housing-church-and-community/about-coming-home>



parental, from friendships to extended family and non-biological kinship responsibilities.

Across generations of social history and tradition, people of faith have turned to the biblical narrative and engaged in a process of active and fearless wrestling with texts in their own context. Wisdom is sought about ways of relating as an intergenerational community - ways of being faithful which includes mutual respect and affection, practical support and the demands of justice. As we shall see, this does not deny the possibility of sacrificial love - a way of self-giving that is in the service of something more, that is not an end in itself.

In all this, what is the pulse that follows through the stories and how might it contribute to the shaping of families and households as “more than” a unit (be it legal, social or economic)? It would be true to say that that pulse is “love”. A truth which resists becoming a truism because of the way in which it is reflected in a series of qualities and expectations. There are the commandments to love of God, self and other which allow for support and sociability, and a life that is satisfying; there are covenant commitments which are about fidelity and fruitfulness as well as stability, which lend themselves to security but also offers space for sacrifice.

Those words are core values which are used in *Coming Home* in relation to housing justice and it should not surprise us, that they continue to resonate in relation to flourishing households and families. They flow from the movements of the biblical story of creation, fall, redemption, the new community and the new creation. As we navigate what it means for generations to come together and help one another grow in wisdom - harmonising rights (of individuals) and demands (of our social life together) - there it is a pulse of love, rooted in sacrifice, which forms our imaginations, practices, relationships and priorities.

*Coming Home*, like the work of the Commission on Families and Households, was inspired by the 2018 book by Archbishop Justin Welby entitled *Reimagining Britain: Foundations for Hope*.<sup>3</sup> He wrote of the need to ensure people are not only well housed but also for housing policy to be directed towards creating well-functioning communities. Fostering such community life is one of the building blocks of society and *Coming Home* articulates practical

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<sup>3</sup> Justin Welby, *Reimagining Britain: Foundations of Hope* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).



ways of implementing this hope. It made recommendations for government and others, and also looked at ways in which the Church of England could work in partnership with others to tackle the housing crisis.

Before setting out its key messages, *Coming Home* highlights five core values which express a new stand for good housing: 'A good home is a place that enables us to live in harmony with the natural environment, it is a place where we feel safe, it enables us to put down roots and belong to a community, it is a place we enjoy living and which is a delight to come home to. In other words, homes should be: sustainable, safe, stable, sociable, satisfying'.<sup>4</sup>

*Reimagining Britain* also aims to articulate and address the pressures and challenges facing households and families - in all their diversity - whilst also highlighting what is good. In the chapter entitled 'Family - Caring for the Core' families are described as being 'flexible groups with somewhat elastic boundaries'; with structures ranging from 'the oppressive and abusive to the utterly liberating and healing'.<sup>5</sup> In his reading of the parable of son (or loving father), Welby explores the nature of love in action with which reflects on the contingency and complexity of family life. He concludes that families/households require three things: unity to support each other; being equipped to inspire courage, aspiration and creativity; ways of generating resilience, from laughter to sacrifice.<sup>6</sup>

To respond to changes in family life and household formation the Commission's work streams focus on couple relationships, children and young people, social history and theology (reflecting the basis in Christian tradition). Although circumstances and social pressures or opportunities change, the needs of human beings do not: families and households offer support and stability; they are places of learning how to relate and habits of life. As such they are cornerstones of life in community - a gift but not an idol.

The terms of reference of the Commission ask, with a foundation in Christian theology and awareness of society, what are the things which need to happen to enable families and households to flourish. It takes into account the impact of Covid-19 and also seeks to build on the recommendations of the Housing

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<sup>4</sup> *Coming Home*, full report, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Welby, *Reimagining Britain*, p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> Welby, *Reimagining Britain*, pp. 71-2.



Commission. In the process of asking what strengthens support for families and households - in relation to public policy and the role of churches or faith communities - the renewal of values is an important and innovative basis for practical action.

Therefore, in offering ideas which are deliverable and practical - in relation to maximising the contributions of faith groups and shaping the trajectory of public policy - building on the values of *Coming Home* is intuitive and logical. They fit the Commission's remit and resonate with institutions and individuals. However, we seek to do more than merely adopt the language - we will be aiming to apply and develop it. In addition, we extend the relational aspect of those values by including a sixth: that of sacrifice. It is a value with rich reference within the Christian tradition, but also one which holds many of our human ways of expressing the word which emerged in the call for evidence: love.

The call for evidence gives substance to "love" in language such as kindness, honesty, commitment, belonging, connectedness, generosity, and mutual care; it is expressed disagreeing and forgiving. Such language echoes the framing of love in 1 Corinthians 13 - a set of qualities which are ultimately framed in relation to God's love. Sacrifice serves as an umbrella for such hopes and practices. It is a word which, as we will explore, runs through Scripture and finds particular focus in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Those core values - sustainable, safe, stable, sociable, satisfying and sacrifice - also assist us as we weave biblical witness together with attentiveness to the contemporary lived. We will need to wrestle with it imaginatively. By so doing, we might include the experience of single person households, blended families and care for the elderly (within and beyond the church). Those values are also part of the growth in wisdom we long for, which is the Spirit's gift within human relating.

As we engaged in visits and focus groups, which have helped to shape the theology that has emerged, we caught glimpses of such Spirit-led fruitfulness in mentoring, partnerships and shared spaces. There are other ways of seeing families and households than as separate or isolated, or as only related (or not) by geographical proximity or infrastructural divides. Like "cells" within honey comb there are multiple points of connection. Those cells are not only



households but schools and faith communities, public services and voluntary sector providers, places of work and leisure.

The challenge is to consider how the Church bears witness to the good news of Jesus Christ through its support for children and young people, couple relationships including marriage, intergenerational life and the diversity of family or household formation. It is also mindful of increasing societal pressures on families and households - including the cost of living crisis and the increasing incidences of loneliness irrespective of household situation.

Before presenting some snapshots or case studies from scripture, I will offer an overview: together this will be the basis of exploring the wider theological themes in relation to the core values. This opens up reflection on the ways in which our individual desires are shaped as well as the formation of social life (domestically, ecclesial and within public life).

### **Biblical overview**

By way of an overview of this biblical pattern of faithfulness and love, we see the pain and the healing. In Adam and Eve we see desires disoriented and freedom turned to self: self-sufficiency, self-reliance and self-determination.<sup>7</sup> In their offspring, we see the unravelling of human relationships through jealousy and violence.<sup>8</sup> In Abraham and Sarah we see promise, hope, blessing and the promise of decedents - a promise refracted not only in Sarah's laughter but in Hagar's story and in Isaac's binding.<sup>9</sup> The lives of Jacob (and Esau), of Joseph and his brothers - the proverbial "technicolour dream coat" - covers marriages, rivalries, grief, wrestling, penitence and restoration.<sup>10</sup>

There are texts which help us grown in wisdom - as we seek to harmonise the demands of social life with individual rights. The psalms speak of human experience in all its diversity from being formed in the womb to making the grave our bed.<sup>11</sup> There is the sorrow of being like a lonely bird to the hope for a quiver full of children.<sup>12</sup> The Prophets call us to prioritise the widow, the

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 4.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 12:1-4, 15:1-6; Genesis 16 and 18:12; Genesis 22.

<sup>10</sup> This narrative arc which runs from Genesis 27-50, but we might reflect on e.g. Genesis 27:34-38; 37:9-11, 23-33; 45:1-5.

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 139.

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 102 and Psalm 127.



orphan and the alien.<sup>13</sup> When harmony breaks down, they liken a wayward people to an unfaithful spouse.<sup>14</sup> There is the grit of honesty in this oyster of love and solidarity.

The harmonising of rights and demands are refracted through the Gospels too. Mary's "yes" to God includes the story of her engagement, the risk of social isolation and her reliance on a cousin.<sup>15</sup> Later we read of siblings being called to discipleship and fathers left at the nets.<sup>16</sup> We see the depth of friendship with siblings at Bethany - including grief, hospitality, different temperaments and perceptions of what is fair/unfair, easy/burdensome.<sup>17</sup> A disciple witnesses the healing of his mother-in-law, whilst Jesus poses the question who is his mother, before entrusting his mother to his beloved friend.<sup>18</sup>

In the Acts of the Apostles, we see households led by an economically independent woman and a community of widows bound together through the creative skill of another.<sup>19</sup> We see Peter and Cornelius begin drawn into a hunger for the other as households form within the household of faith - cutting across expectations of empire and ethnicity.<sup>20</sup>

Paul himself works through the dynamics of marriages of faith and across faiths; framing the place of slaves within church and society, whilst proclaiming a kinship of adoption.<sup>21</sup> The concern about the future and the end of times reframes the call to singleness - a call that is echoed in our generation as we face the impact of changing climate, environmental degradation and sustainability.<sup>22</sup> Life is ordered by household codes - codes which set up the possibility of harmonising rights and demands, individuals and social life.<sup>23</sup> Yet there is also space for the breath of the Spirit to make these ways of holiness fruitful.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jeremiah 7:6, Zechariah 7:10 and Isaiah 1:17 - reflecting e.g. Deuteronomy 10:18.

<sup>14</sup> Hosea 1:2, 2:2-23; Jeremiah 2:23-5:19.

<sup>15</sup> Luke 1-2 and also Matthew 1:18-25.

<sup>16</sup> Mark 1:16-20.

<sup>17</sup> John 11:5, John 12: 3-8, Luke 10:38-42.

<sup>18</sup> Mark 1:30-31, Matthew 12:48 and John 19: 26-27

<sup>19</sup> Acts 16 and Acts 9.

<sup>20</sup> Acts 10.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, Ephesians 5:21-33, Philemon, Galatians 4:4-6.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Corinthians 7: 25-31.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Peter 3.

<sup>24</sup> Galatians 5:22-3.





### Scriptural Snapshots

The Bible tells a story which speaks to the very heart of what it is to be human - the questions, hurts and struggles; the joys, blessings and hopes. Dwelling on some of those points of connection between that narrative and the stories within it and our own context offers inspiration and challenge.

**Families:** In Matthew 12, Jesus asks the creative and disruptive question of ‘who is my mother, sister, brother?’ He answers by pointing to his disciples to indicate a notion of family and kinship which is rooted in doing the will of his Father. There is something radical and recognisable about his response. There will be points in our own lives when those beyond our biological family play an important role in mentoring and encouraging us, or fostering a sense of acceptance, belonging, identity and purpose.

That recognisable aspect of the question might run across and within generations (e.g. god-parents or peer groups). To that extent, Jesus’ question extends the notion of family rather than eroding it. However, the bonds that Jesus names are not based solely on affection but on a demanding and sacrificial imperative to do the will of God. We the dynamics of such an imperative might have an inward or domestic aspect as well as an external and social one.

One the one hand, if households and families provide the context where we learn to honour God and each other, what are the expectations of such kinship bonds - for children, blended families and the elderly - and how do we honour them? On the other hand, how do we enable families and households to strengthen wider social ties - considering the regional variations in valuing social stability versus mobility.

**Marriage:** In considering the place of couple relationships, marriage remains an important part of our legal and social fabric. Civil marriage now includes both same sex and opposite sex couples. Theologically, scripture and tradition combine to present a positive view of marriage as being about fidelity and life-long commitment, as well as being regarded as the foundation of family life.

Part of the creation ordinance in Genesis chapter 2 is often interpreted as one man and one woman given in marriage. That understanding is also evident in the way it is picked up in Jesus’ teaching on divorce. However, these words





also offer wisdom and challenge about what it means to have a ‘help-mate’ in life. There is something compelling and enriching about a notion of someone to come alongside the other; stressing the importance of shared endeavours and not being alone.

We might also consider what it means to be ‘one flesh’ in relation to our understandings of households, in particular the household of faith, including Paul’s image of the church as one body with many members.

It is worth attending to the ways in which this shapes our understanding of intimacy, embodiment and commitment to others. Preparation for and support of marriage is not only a good in itself, but carries with it a hope and exception that wider social bonds between households will be strengthened too. This is something picked up in the Church of England’s Marriage Service with its expression of a fidelity and loving commitment which builds up our common life, overflowing to embrace those in distress and offering hospitality.

In addition, reflection on what it means to have a help-mate gives us a language to honour friendships which in their own way become life-giving and in some cases life-long. There is scope for honouring the particular intimacy of such bonds which, rather than being a threat to couple relationships can be a means of support too (again, echoed in the question to friends and family within the Marriage Service inviting their supporting and upholding the couple).

***The child/children:*** The early chapters of Genesis open up the realm of couple relationships and helpmates, but the creation ordinance also includes questions about fruitfulness. Whilst we might legitimately frame the generativity of relationships in terms of wider social goods beyond the couple, verses such as 1:26-28 are most explicitly about raising children.

Western societies, England included, have seen a fall in birthrates. In the context of climate change and carbon footprints, remaining childfree is a choice for the wider good. This is sometimes combined with an anxiety that if the world is ending or unpredictable or even apocalyptic it is better not to have children, perhaps echoing some New Testament literature. Some have sought to encourage or incentivise having larger families - for example the “Quiverfull” movement in the United States of America.



The place of the child remains a central concern for households and families. In Mark 10, for example, children were brought to Jesus to be blessed. Despite some of the disciples trying to hold them back, we see several positive dynamics at play. There is the desire of those bringing children to Jesus that they might be in proximity to him and be blessed by them; and there is the desire of Jesus to welcome them and to meet that desire.

Jesus' encounter with children extends further than a particular moment of blessing: elsewhere Jesus places the child at the centre and speaks of receiving the Kingdom as a child - in this sense we too are invited to enlarge our social imaginations. This might include meeting their needs and being receptive to what they can teach us - but their place within society (and collective responsibilities to ensure their safety and development).

In focusing on a child, Jesus is placing at the centre one who is vulnerable in terms of social and economic status and agency. Not only does this invite reflection on the shifts in our understanding of childhood and adolescence within our social history, but also a mindfulness about who else occupies that vulnerable space today (including the isolated, victims of domestic abuse and those ageing alone).

**Ageing:** Scripture affords us fresh perspectives on ageing which have the potential to share our reflections as an ageing society grappling with caring responsibilities, social isolation, expectations around health and life expectancy beyond retirement. In Luke 1 and 2, the stories of Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon and Anna, allow us to explore the place of those who are older in the domestic and religious realms.

There are times of seclusion and times of public ministry. They embrace a new generation in different ways - in becoming parents themselves, or in seeing God's wider purposes at work in a young family's act of devotion. In each case, there is attentiveness and trust, words of promise and fulfilment. Salvation draws near in an intergenerational space.

If salvation is in part about hope for the future, then thinking about households and families across generations has an important role to play. There is the potential for mutual support as well as offering security; there



may be enhanced social life. However, there will also be times of sacrifice - in care-giving itself, but also in wealth distribution (including property).

**Singleness:** The number of single person households has been increasing steadily - as a result of a range of social and economic factors. What is often an unacknowledged given is that we will spend some or all of our adult life single as a result of choices, circumstances, callings.

The diversity of single states, and contentment or isolation within them, highlights the importance both of cultivating a healthy sense of self, but also of developing networks of interdependence between households. The introduction of the concept of the “bubble” recognised this need for contact and connection during the pandemic (and some of those choices were sacrificial as well as satisfying e.g. prioritising elderly parent or a child’s friend). Even within couple relationships, there will be things within and beyond our control which lead to single life in absolute or functional terms - including changes to health or work, separation and bereavement.

In reflecting on scripture to offer us a snapshot, we often name the reality of Jesus and Paul being single. However, turning to a figure from Hebrew scriptures might offer ways of thinking which resonate with contemporary circumstances. At the opening of the book that bears his name, Jeremiah is called to be a prophet. His youth is mentioned, without caveats or expectations - he responds to God’s call.

Later, he is told not to marry or have children. There may well be something recognisable about the shifting circumstances increasing numbers of men and women find themselves in - not because of a choice or commitment made in youth, but in response to changing circumstances, demands and opportunities. It might encourage us to think of ways of cultivating a mature sense of self - that is neither selfish or self-reliant but perhaps satisfying and sustaining.

Such an expression of self (rather than constructed self-expression) serves as a basis for healthy relationships. There are also ways in which those who are single contribute in a valuable way to the common good. Again, we can turn back to Jeremiah: in chapter 29, he writes about rebuilding a people. He is single - and childfree or childless - and also has a place in shaping society. How



do we support and strengthen single-person households is a vital part of a social and theological vision for society.

**Households:** Whatever our family circumstances or relational status, we all form households - from single person to multi-occupancy, empty-nesters to blended families. In Scripture too we see a range of households and also codes shaping how they operate - as units and social connections. The emphasis of such codes varies in different letters. A theological hermeneutics which takes seriously text and contexts is important here as we seek Spirit-led interpretations of scripture.

In 1 Peter, for example, we are presented with household codes which invite us to reflect on what it means to show honour to another within the dynamics of couple relationships. It invites reflection on what we mean by weakness and vulnerability and the ways in which we are drawn into a circle of blessing. It also talks about those things which ought to be characteristics of the household of faith - as well as the interplay between households, families, society and God's Kingdom.

The Acts of the Apostles reflects household diversity. Some are led by well-resourced or high-status women as well as men; others include slaves, children, couples. Households serve as places of gathering for worship where there is welcome, disruption and embrace. Such dynamics raise questions about life together as households, as part of the household of faith and within the wider social sphere (and indeed in relation to God's Kingdom).

One of the themes within the household formation is that of our longing for or desire to be with the other as a result of the Spirit's activity. We see this in relation to Lydia - a woman of status and wealth who comes to faith, and whose household becomes a "cell" of the church. We see it in different social terms through the eyes of those who mourn Tabitha (also known as Dorcas): a woman whose skill as a seamstress expressed care, met needs and brought widows together in a household/household of faith.

Perhaps the longing for the other is expressed most vividly not in a single household, but in the way in which Peter comes into Cornelius' household. Leaning into what we can learn about such an encounter if formative for the church - as a household of faith - but also speaks into how we come together



as households across differences of class, ethnicity, culture, religion and make-up to seek a sustainable and satisfying common life together.

***Ways of holiness:*** These are by no means exhaustive snapshots of household and family life within Scripture. How we read and inhabit them will prove both recognisable and challenging in equal measure. However, as we contemplate how these texts address us - even if not written directly to us - it might be that the role of the Spirit acts as a creative measure.

In Galatians, we hear of fruit of the Spirit - set against the fruit of the flesh. As well as reading them as marks of Christian discipleship - and patterns of behaviour to call out for the corrosive impact - might we also see them as a rich qualitative metric for diverse family and household formations. Might we see in their interconnectedness as well as their particularity diverse 'ways of holiness'? For example, we have a measure that accounts for fragility and struggle as well as the stability and faithfulness. This begins to set up further reflection on the core values - including sacrifice - which underpin thinking about families and households.

### **Creation, Sustainability and Support**

The goodness of creation - including human beings and human relationship - is affirmed at the start of the biblical narrative. Sustainability is often framed through the lens of human impact on the natural environment - and how we seek to safeguard creation. In terms of our human relating across generations, there is an added impetus to this concern which relates to the legacy: the resources we use or conserve - or hold in trust for our children's children.

Such a vision is rooted in creation's goodness and flourishing - and the charge not to exploit or degrade. It includes questions of financial sustainability and intergenerational justice. However, there is also a framing of relationships in Genesis which expresses something of our need for mutual support and shared endeavour.

The relationship between Adam and Eve is one of embodied connection - of flesh and bone - and the possibility of faithful, covenanted couple-relationship. It is a vision which is expansive in expressing our human need for helpmates, that is someone who comes alongside us in mutual support and shared endeavour.



Given the increase in loneliness within society, such a vision for sustainable ways of relating within networks and partnerships, friendships and households becomes even more vital: not just important but life-giving and capable of ensuring the vitality of families and households, and revitalising the the connections between them.

### **Fallenness, hope and safety**

Genesis begins with created, creaturely goodness includes the gift and risk of creaturely freedom: there is the possibility of co-operation and protection, but also the reality of harm and brokenness. Tracing the messiness of that fracturing is honest about the human condition and recognisable in our own context.

We use the language of “sin” as a short had for this human propensity to make mistakes, for our hearts to turn inwards; to be selfish rather than selfless in the pursuit and misdirection of our desires. We are wounded and capable of wounding others. Some of that sin is personal and some is structural; we recognise legacies of abused power and trauma.

God’s response to this use or misuse of creaturely freedom is to continue to love the world. There is hope in this: the promises of blessing and covenantal faithfulness; the giving of commandments and the prophetic work of calling God’s people back to those ways of love and mercy.

The telling of stories where things go wrong - through violence, deceit, exploitation and abuse - is accompanied with a call to return to justice. It also includes the hope of a place where we can dwell in safety - the freedom of the promised land and the longing of return when exiled.

To dwell safely and securely is not only a matter of bricks and mortar; it is about the quality of relationships within those four walls. Safety is at the heart of the principles and practices of safeguarding - and the roles that churches, voluntary sector and statutory services have in shaping culture as well as following policy. Safeguarding carries with it the corresponding demands of



justice and mercy.<sup>25</sup> This applies both to children and to adults, recognising that anyone might find themselves in a place of vulnerability and risk of harm.

Households and families within scripture name the reality of rivalry and the possibility of reconciliation - the story of Jacob and his many sons is a compelling version of (in the text of Genesis and the musical *Joseph*. Within household codes we see parameters being set for the showing honour, the disciplined growth to maturity, the passing on of faith and the possibility of blessing.

Safety, within the theological scope of scripture, makes possible the flourishing of individuals and networks of belonging between families and households. It includes the assurance of 'help-mates' and the teaching of children. However, this vision of safety looks beyond biological kinship.

It is a call which includes the safety and protection of the most vulnerable expressed in prioritising the welfare of the widow, orphan and alien (those who are socially vulnerable in our own generation might extend to those who lack someone to act as advocate for them).

### **Redemption, stability and belonging**

As we've noted, God's response to the consequences of our misdirected desires and fracturing of relationships is to continue to love. In Jesus, the Word is made flesh and dwells with us. The one who invites us to come and see - to abide with him - is the one who for the sake of our redemption walks a way of suffering and death. Such sacrificial love is a life-giving word; a love which calls into a faithful way of living - as individuals and groups - to extend a circle of blessing.

That blessing is expansive as the promise made to Abraham. It includes stable units of life together - mutual support and the sharing of resources. It extends to include the seeking the welfare of cities in exile as well as the hope of returning and rebuilding. This returning and rebuilding is part of a rhythm of God's redeeming activity.

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<sup>25</sup> Reports produced by the Faith and Order Commission, aimed at helping congregations and leaders reflect on safeguarding, can be found here: <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/faith-and-order-commission#na>





In Jesus, this redemptive promise is made flesh to draw all things to Godself. The dying and rising of the Son opens up the possibility of a community of mutual love. Such a community draws its life from the advocacy, comfort and renewal of the Holy Spirit. This opens up ways of holiness - and the measure of such holiness in the fruit we see. As such, stability understood through this lens is not static or restrictive, but open to growth and renewal.

Belonging in faithful relationships - begins from childhood and the sense of assurance in who we are as a beloved child of God. To know oneself as fearfully and wonderfully made as the psalmist put it, opens up the possibility of relating to others out of a point of stability and wholeness rather than a sense of lack (which fulfils the myth that we need another to complete us). Growth in maturity is aided by models of reconciled or reconciling relationships - how we handle loss or disagreement, disappointment or hurt.

Stability enables us to put down roots in order to invest in the wider community and receive support within it. When families and individuals have a sense of belonging and a commitment to those beyond their own household, the particular and the whole are strengthened.

In terms of couple relationships long term stability might begin with the investment in marriage propagation and relationship support. Redemptive activity and life together might include the transformation of conflict and resourcing places of refuge.

Stability is required for couples and singles, children and elderly: a faithful and fruitful way of relating across life. Our individual households need to be linked by spaces or places of connection, acceptance, support and advice (including schools and public open space). Yet stability and belonging are threatened by rising costs of living.

That makes it even pressing to cultivate a vision of families and households which affirms the importance of support across generations - a stability of experience and possibility. It is a vision that invites us to imaging a notion of belonging not defined or limited by biological kinship. That is something with we risk sitting lightly to or idolising. Instead, seeking the will of a God who loves by dwelling with us in Christ and continues to move us through the Spirit's work of advocacy, there is hope stable belonging becomes redemptive.



### Community, sociability and hospitality

Our social lives reflect our cultural particularity and expectations, but also enables celebration of that diversity. For communities to be sociable, there is an intersection between friends and families, households and neighbours. There are questions of what it means to host and to be a guest - and the need for community spaces to build strong connections and facilitate interactions (at times of tragedy as well as celebration).

The church's vision for such communal flourishing is rooted in the establishment of a new community which is one in Christ. It's a community whose social life is formed in worship - including the breaking of bread - but which also flows out into the world. This enacted redemption is about a belonging that is not exclusive but which facilitates understanding of self and other.

Sociability is also dependent on good boundaries between, and points of connection across, households. It is a shaping of household and family life which allows for privacy but also creative play; which recognises interdependence and notices those on the margins.

The pandemic introduced the concept of the "bubble" recognising that households needed each other - needed ways of being together and supporting one another. The loss of opportunities of habitual shared experience and encounter put people at risk - of loneliness, isolation and harm.

Social life in scripture is often framed around the provision of or sharing of bread and wine: from daily dependence upon manna in the wilderness to the sharing of loaves amongst thousands on a hillside, from the miraculous fine wine when resources run low at a wedding in Cana to the cup of blessing shared in anticipation of a heavenly banquet. There are parables drawing together neighbours and friends for a party to celebrate finding that which was lost - a coin, a sheep and a child. Jesus, the one who told such parables, ate meals prepared by friends, leaders and strangers before breaking bread as a sign of the gift of his own body. For the church, the repeated gathering around one table to share one bread calls us into a movement which underpins hospitable social life: there is repentance, forgiveness, abundance and blessing.



It is perhaps that our sociability is a form of enacted redemption as we welcome others as friends: where there is laughter and consolation, where young and old can dream dreams. Offering spaces for recreation and playfulness - relies on liminal spaces of different sorts: maintaining open spaces and play areas; access to activities for shared interests, developing skills. Single households and family groups can both contribute to, and rely on, those places of intersection.

### **Resurrection, satisfaction and flourishing**

Our ways of relating across households and within and beyond families, is something which can bring delight and pleasure. The joy of flourishing households is something which provides a glimpse of the new creation. Something that stretches imagination in relation to concern for the other and also the ways of holiness we pursue - alone in seasons of singleness, together in forms of couple relationship and also as friends, mentors and carers.

The biblical story began with creation - a garden where it is not good to be alone; where relationships form as helpmates, partners, parents and children. That story ends with a vision of a heavenly city - united in a common purpose of praise and worship, where the hope of the healing of the nations is fulfilled. This vision of a final home-coming and restored relationships is shot through with music, colour, beauty and joy. It presents a vision of a harmonious order of life together.

We see glimpses of that harmony in some of our scripture: in Jeremiah's commitment to rebuilding a people and in Joseph's embrace of his estranged brothers; we see it in household codes which seek to enable mutual honour and affection and in the acts of practical care offered by Tabitha to the widows.

In the book of Ruth we see the ways in which family relationships are shared by changing circumstances and the possibility of different choices being made. Through the lens of marriages and widowhood, we see different responses and decisions being made by two daughters-in-law.

The story unfolds in a way which touches on identity, ethnicity and religion; layers of loyalty and responsibility; the nature of kinship in terms of legal obligation and human affection. The story is concerned with safety and



stability - and sacrifices that are made for the sake of those things. It also keeps one the possibility of sociability - and social responsibility - and, for the purposes of this report, it also points to relationships which are satisfying as well as supportive. There is the satisfaction of the provision of food and of belonging - for the one returning home to family and the one making a home in a new household. There is the satisfaction of being able to exercise personal agency and fulfil wider responsibilities as well as that of sexual intimacy and fidelity (which extends to children and grandchildren).

The layers of satisfaction and flourishing reach beyond the lives of those named in the narrative to the reality of Ruth being named in the genealogy of Jesus Christ - son of David, son of Abraham, a descendent of Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth. As Herbert McCabe points out 'people could belong to one family, be brethren, without worrying about the exact biology of it all'.<sup>26</sup> Jesus belonged to a family as diverse and complicated as our own - marked by the realities of sin and the gift of blessing. As McCabe continues, Jesus 'belonged to *us*, and came to help *us*, no wonder he came to a bad end, and gave us some *hope*'.<sup>27</sup>

That is the heart of the matter in terms of a distinctively Christian approach to families and household. The mess is there and yet through the cross and resurrection there is renewed hope. Hope of forgiveness, healing, forgiveness and new life; the hope of a love that has the final word and which enables us to see human bodies and relationships differently. That is why however satisfying and stable, sustainable, safe and sociable our life together, it is underpinned by sacrificial love: something vulnerable and strong.

### **Sacrifice, vulnerability and strength**

Having revisited the sweep of the biblical story, with a focus on specific snapshots of our life alone and together, we catch glimpses of a pulse of love. A love that is human and divine. A love that is vulnerable and costly but which has the capacity to be generous in sacrificial action in support of others, strengthening not just one family but a network of households (and the places of intersection between them).

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<sup>26</sup> H. McCabe, 'The genealogy of Christ' in *God Matters* (London: Mowbray, 1987), p. 249.

<sup>27</sup> McCabe, 'The genealogy of Christ', p. 249.



This love finds its fulfilment in Jesus: in his life, death and resurrection. In John chapter 19 we are drawn to the foot of the cross where a small group of women witness words between Jesus, his mother and the beloved disciple. They are words of practical love and care uttered at the point of love's momentous sacrifice. It is at the hour when Jesus is lifted up on the cross to draw all people to Godself that he speaks words which form a new household, a blending or bonding of families.

On the night before he died, Jesus has spoken of love: of loving to the end, of laying down life for friends, of disciples being known by their love. Now he speaks to his mother and his friend. He asks them to receive each other - to see each other as kin and to abide in one house and home. At the cross love is poured out for the world but that love is known first in the creation of a new form of loving relationship, foreshadowing the fullness of the new creation.

It affirms a mutual belonging to the other - of love and trust, of grief and solidarity, of intimacy rooted in God's love for the world. Out of the depths of pain and humiliation, a community or household is formed. As Jesus breathes his last and gives up his spirit, something new is inspired. In anticipation of the coming of the Spirit, life is breathed into this quiet, vulnerable, pragmatic and hopeful relating.

In this sacrifice of love, our horizon of relating is extended: 'it may even be that this mostly hidden spread of the Spirit of the crucified Jesus is primary, pervasive, as embanking and as available as the air we breathe from the atmosphere encompassing the earth, and able to cross boundaries and inspire people, groups, traditions, communities, nations, and movements in repeatedly surprising ways'.<sup>28</sup> That movement of Spirit-led love begins with a friend and mother - united in grief and called into a new way of costly relating and self-giving. There is vulnerability in this - but also immense strength.

In our households and families, sacrificial love may not always be reflected in the things that are noticeable or recorded. It is likely to be reflected in ways that sit with a grieving mother and friend: the risk of being honest or of saying sorry; the capacity to create space for another to be accepted and safe. It might be in taking time to communicate and resolve conflict, handling

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<sup>28</sup> David Ford, *The Gospel of John: a theological commentary* (Grand Rapids MI : Baker, 2021), p. 388.



emotions, learning from what has happened rather than blaming another. At other times, it is extending kindness and care beyond family or street to the neighbourhood; somehow bearing the cost of love and the hope of transformation together.

Sacrificial love from letting go at the school gate to celebrating the commitment of couple relationships to holding a hand at hospice bedside. This is the stuff of households, the fabric of family life, the development of social networks and God's kingdom: from God's creative activity to the hope of salvation in Jesus - a pulse of love which draws human relating into the work of the Spirit.

### Conclusion

There is hope in this for shaping of our personhood, households, families and society in relation to love divine - all loves excelling, in the words of Wesley's hymn. It is something that helps us to nature a community of love and solidarity - so that families and households can be places where different generations can come together. We need to come together to grow in wisdom, to find joy and compassion; to find ways of allowing the spaces between our households and families which strength society and enrich community. Harmonising individual rights and the demands of our corporate life is an expression of sacrificial love - oriented to the pursuit of the other core values in order that life can be safe, stable, sociable, satisfying and sustainable.

Reflecting on scripture alongside human experience enables us to attend to God's ways with the world. In the words of Daniel Hardy, the light of God is refracted in the world like a band of colour - we are called to work with and from that band of colour.<sup>29</sup> As we pay attention to the ways in which families, households and relationships are configured - and what strengthens or weakens them - we come back to the metric of scripture, as a means of shaping our social life. The Christian tradition uses the language of holiness to describe this way of living well together - with hearts turned outwards to the other rather than inwards to the self.

Paying attention to the biblical families, households and relationships we glimpse challenges and encouragement in what is still in sense written for us. It

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<sup>29</sup> D. W. Hardy, *God's Ways with the World; Thinking and Practising Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p. x.



is honest about our human propensity to misdirect our desires - in controlling or exploiting or diminishing others - and what we might call in shorthand “sin” which is the lived reality of wounding others as well as being wounded by them. However, it also reveals the hope of human flourishing, faithfulness and fruitfulness before God. For God’s response to the human condition and our use/misuse of freedom is to love and to heal. We see grace at work - and the hope of salvation.

This contributes to the shaping of a vision which is the goal of human relating: a vision which acknowledges our human frailty but which also holds out the hope of life in all its fulness. As such it counters isolation, loneliness and brokenness, abuse, breakdown and neglect. It is a vision rooted in the hope that God was in Jesus reconciling the world to Godself; and the ongoing work of the Spirit is bringing forth the fruit of such sacrificial love.

Dan Hardy coined the word *sociopoiesis* to describe these generative and transformative pattern which embraces all forms of personal and social activity - as our desires are re-directed towards God and the other. Another way of expressing that is to use the language of God’s kingdom - where we glimpse justice and mercy at work. Hardy describes the way in which our care for others draws on a sacramental energy; and the ways in which the formation of the church’s social life as a household of God relates to God’s ways with the world.<sup>30</sup> We can map the points of connection in their subtly and complexity - schools and homes, hospitals and sports clubs, theatres and play grounds, cafes and drop-in centres.

Love is taken for many things: something relational which binds us to others - family, friends, neighbours. We expect it to find expression in compassion or desire; for it to be marked by faithfulness and joy. Love can be sacrificial - literally an offering of oneself, a giving whether it is received or reciprocated or not. Ultimately such love is the life and movement of God as Trinity. A love which we can trust and hold onto as families and households come under pressure or change shape; but it is also a love which takes shape in advocating for policies and priorities which strengthen them. A deep and compassionate concern for how we live - alone and together - is part of witnessing to God’s love and seeking or serving God’s kingdom.

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<sup>30</sup> D. W. Hardy, *Wording a Radiance: Parting Conversations on God and the Church* (London: SCM Press, 2012) p. 51-2.