

Towards a Common Vision

Family Life +Sophie Jelley

'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God.'
(1 John 4: 7a)

Family and Society

'The answer to bad families is not no families but good families'.¹ Family life in the UK is both diverse and complex. In 2021 the Archbishops launched a Commission on Families and Households, resulting in a report published in April 2023. The Commission considered a vast quantity of evidence, reaching the simple yet profound conclusion that, as the title states: 'Love Matters'. It is love which can help us build a kinder, fairer, and more forgiving society. Whilst most would agree that families are central to our psychological emotional social and spiritual well-being, many families are under immense pressure and struggle to become the strong stable families founded on loving relationships that help to form strong stable societies. The responsibility of government is to shape policies that enable individuals, families and households to flourish and to resource the support they need to develop resilience in the face of socio-economic pressures.

Families do not exist in isolation. In recent years, families and households have faced new challenges, resulting in unprecedented levels of need for support in every area of life. The COVID-19 pandemic had sudden and far-reaching impact on every household in the UK and those most disadvantaged, especially those from global minority heritage cultures, suffered the worst consequences. This was quickly followed by the energy crisis and ensuing economic hardship including huge price rises and high inflation, again affecting the most disadvantaged disproportionately.² In 2022 the invasion of Ukraine led to a significant movement of women and children seeking safety, in addition to existing migration levels, relating to war, political oppression and economic conditions affecting the lives of many children and families across the world and here in the UK. Climate change and the ongoing threat from global warming also continues to challenge every family and household in every part of the world, as increasing temperatures threaten many aspects of daily life. Again, the most disadvantaged face disproportionate challenges in relation to survival and in making choices that conserve and protect the earth's resources. The IPCC report in March 2023 makes clear, 'the risks of inaction on climate are immense and the way ahead requires change at a scale not seen before,'³ at the point of writing Europe is experiencing the highest temperatures ever recorded.

The history of the family is not straight forward either. The idealisation of family life in the Victorian era remains with us, as conceptions of family life, focusing on men as breadwinners and women as homemakers within a patriarchal model of family stability, bled into the 20th century despite major change in the roles of women and men in the last 50 years. Though this brought some advantages in terms of the stability it gave to the concept

¹ Welby, J. Reimagining Britain: Foundations for Hope (2018) Bloomsbury

² Schmuecker, K et al (2022) Going without: deepening poverty in the UK. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/going-without-deepening-poverty-uk> (2022)

³ Boehm, S., and Schumer, C., (2023) IPCC Report on Climate Change, World Resources Institute

of family, there remain questions about the genuine freedom of individuals to thrive in such a context. With increased choice in how couples decide to live their lives in the twenty-first century, in 2021 in the UK 63% of the 8.2 million families with children consisted of married couples, 14% were cohabiting couples and 23% were headed by a lone parent of whom 90% were women. Cohabitation has increased significantly, and these families are functionally similar to those who are married or in a civil partnership. The Women and Inequalities Committee has argued that 'the lack of comprehensive legal protections for cohabitants upon relationship breakdown means that women, especially women from ethnic minority backgrounds and those who have had a religious only marriage can suffer relationship generated disadvantage.'⁴ There is considerable pressure that cohabiting couples should be offered greater protection in law. This is a proposal that causes concern for the C of E. Whilst marriage is still highly valued, neither marriage, civil partnership nor cohabitation guarantees lifelong stable partnership.

Singleness is an increasing category of society which is often overlooked. A third of the nation live alone⁵, the reasons for which vary considerably. Whilst some make it a deliberate choice, others do not and the impact of relationship breakdown and bereavement together with other factors makes loneliness an increasingly important consideration for some in our communities.

Family and Young People

Much attention has been given to the kind of circumstances that enable children and young people to thrive and those that do not. In particular, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have been defined as 'traumatic experience...before the age of 18 which can lead to negative, lifelong emotional and physical outcomes.'⁶ The correlation between ACEs and poverty show that social inequality makes this much more likely. The protective effect of 'family' has been evidenced by the Millennium cohort study and the family survey conducted by the Children's Commissioner. Young people clearly expressed their desire to live in happy homes.

Factors threatening wellbeing include parental mental ill health, addiction, poverty, domestic abuse and relationship breakdown. When things go radically wrong, and children become involved in the care system, the state's corporate parenting responsibility is intended to provide the kind of support the child needs to thrive. In 2021 the independent review of children's social care, set out the need for significant reform describing it as a 'once in a generation opportunity to reset children's social care with a system that provides intensive help to families in crisis, involves extended family members in the delivery of care, and unlocks the potential of fostering and adoption when families are unable to provide appropriate care. The review puts lifelong loving relationships at the heart of the care

⁴ Women and Equalities Committee, (2022), The rights of cohabiting partners, HC <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmwomeq/92/report.html>

⁵ www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2021#toc

⁶ Asmussen, K., Fischer, F., Drayton, E., and McBride, T., (2020) Adverse childhood experiences: what we know, what we don't know and what should happen next. Early Intervention Foundation

system and lays the foundations for a good life for those who have been in care'.⁷ Young carers, often hidden in plain sight, also need significant support as they provide care whilst carrying many household responsibilities while still at school. The Children's Society estimate that in respect of 800,000 young carers in the UK, 27% of those between 11 and 15 years are missing school or struggling to keep up. These children can be much more vulnerable to harm.⁸

In all this, hearing the voices of children and young people is paramount, especially those experiencing the worst circumstances in our society including those involved in the criminal justice system. The Family Justice Young People's Board has developed a national charter for supporting young people affected by domestic abuse, emphasising the centrality of the child. In 2021 the numbers of young people involved in the youth justice system had fallen but there is still significant concern about the disproportionate representation of black children at all stages of the youth justice system. Black children are more likely to be stopped and searched than children from other ethnicities. 80% of all stop and searches result in no further action. Black children are four times more likely to be arrested than white children and the proportion of children in custody was up to 29% in 2021 from 18% ten years earlier.⁹

Family life and the church

The Church of England is deeply committed to helping families flourish. Though there has been much discussion about the parish system in recent years and the nature of the Church of England as the established church, it remains the case that every person in every community lives within a parish boundary, offering the opportunity to recognise particular rites of passage in their parish church context, should they wish to do so. Many parents still choose to have their children christened, come to church for weddings or request funerals. These remain opportunities for the Church of England to minister to and support family life at a variety of stages. Toddler groups enable companionship and care in the community becoming especially significant due to increased social mobility, sometimes resulting in families living miles from their support network. Parenting courses, marriage preparation and relationship support are also offered through the church as are groups and activities for children at home, in church schools and in the wider community. Many uniformed organisations are affiliated to churches and have close relationships with the wider community. All of these provide ways in which children and families can find a place of belonging support and development.

Such a focus on family life can be challenging in relation to singleness. Organisations such as single friendly church¹⁰ have played a significant part in raising awareness of the need to attend to the issues relating to those who live alone and seeking to ensure they are valued and enabled to play a full part in their life of the community. That Jesus was himself single, is

⁷ MacAlister, J., (2021) The Case for Change: The Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/IRCSC_The_Case_for_Change_27.05.22.pdf

⁸ The Children's Society (2020) Hidden from view: the experiences of young carers

⁹ Youth Justice Board (2022) Youth Justice Statistics: 2020 to 2021 www.gov.uk

¹⁰ <https://www.singlefriendlychurch.com/>

often overlooked, there is much to be learned from the value he places on his close relationships with his family, friends and the wider community.

The intergenerational nature of church communities is also a significant asset, being one of the only contexts in which all generations come together often at the same time, in the same place, learning from one another, growing and supporting each other through life. This also presents significant challenges not least in relation to safeguarding. Dementia is also a growing concern.¹¹ The development of dementia friendly church has been a valued response.¹²

The cost-of-living crisis has also significantly affected churches operations and activities, individuals are less able to support these activities in the way they have in the past. Food banks, pantries and social supermarkets, helping low-income families, including those in work, as well as 'warm spaces', assisting those struggling with fuel costs, have markedly increased across the country. Church schools have also been impacted, seeing a rise in the need for breakfast clubs and uniform banks with children lacking basic hygiene products and other necessities.

Though references to family in the bible are ubiquitous¹³, it is difficult to make direct comparisons with family life today but there are some significant principles to be born in mind. The book of Ruth, the story of an extended family, caring for the stranger the orphan and the widow, demonstrates God's priority for the last, the least and the lost. There are many examples of communities that have taken to heart the principles of caring for the 'other' and begun to put them into practice with lasting positive impact. 'Mill Grove' is a Christian community that began with the informal fostering of one child and has since welcomed over 1000 children into a household in which all are welcomed to find a loving family. Christian organisations such as Home for Good, Safer Families and Children NE are all examples of supportive loving relationships making a practical difference in a way that prioritises God's care.

In recent years, attention has been paid to the need for an Anglican social theology in light of the changing nature of society, recognising the need for a clear rationale for holistic care in the community as a gospel imperative. Organisations such as Church Urban Fund have reflected on the motivation for action; taking an 'asset based' approach to community development,¹⁴ which has been significant in achieving important changes in local communities and policy changes at national level such as the living wage.

¹¹ UK Dementia Research (2023) <http://www.alzheimersresearchuk.org/>

¹² James, I., (2022) Training Religious Leaders to Enhance the Wellbeing of People Living with Dementia Through the Delivery of Organised Religious Services. Supporting Papers | www.churchofengland.org/families-and-households

¹³ www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/fhc_theology-insights_isabelle-hamley.pdf

¹⁴ John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing A Community's Assets, 1993

Family life and the future

Just as in the past, support for the formation and development of loving relationships must continue to be a core priority for all those in positions of leadership and responsibility. Recognising the complexity of life in the UK today and the diversity of families and households, the church has a responsibility both to help people know that they are loved and loveable, to model and live out forgiveness in tangible ways and to demonstrate empathy, that which can be defined as ‘feeling with’ people, at a time when many feel isolated and fearful about the future. The biblical narrative is one of both hope and healing for the future with a God who continually offers new and renewed possibilities for our lives. To model forgiveness and compassion in a way that reflects the character of Christ in action sounds simple but remains challenging work for all God’s people.

In particular there is a need to reimagine the future by working together with government organisations and other faith communities to support families and children as well as individuals.

As the Church of England with a mission to England this means, “being disciples....being able to see others from the perspective of an eternal, unflinching, unalterable love’¹⁵

Key Recommendations for family life and households to flourish

1. Develop a clear cross-government strategy to end child poverty.
2. Maximise the protective effect of the family. Ensure that all new government policies and services are subject to a stronger family test.
3. Prioritise tackling poverty and reforming the social security system so that it better reflects the complex reality of family life.
4. Provide long term support for family hubs enabling them to become an established source of support for all families and individuals to approach without stigma, working in partnership with voluntary organisations and faith communities.
5. Ensure that building strong and stable relationships in every family and household is central to the priorities of every government department, with a designated Cabinet-level Minister holding responsibility for the implementation, oversight and publication of a family review.
6. Invest in relationship capability and relationship support for all couples to build and maintain strong, stable families and, when necessary, enable them to separate well. This should be done in partnership with specialist charities, community groups, statutory agencies and faith communities.
7. Work with community groups and statutory agencies to urgently address the disproportionality of black children within the criminal justice system, improve relationships, call out discrimination, and ensure appropriate support is available for young people affected.
8. Reduce waiting times in the family justice system and the youth justice system.
9. Deliver the National Youth Guarantee by guaranteeing shared safe spaces for every child and young person to gather, play and engage with their peers, with a renewed

¹⁵ Williams, R. ‘Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life’ p73

vision for the place and role of sports, creative arts, community service and youth clubs.

10. Encourage the imaginative development of different forms of relational and accommodation support for young people leaving care, ensuring that every young person leaving care should have consistent, loving relationships to help them flourish.

Further reading

<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/hf-report-digital-1-6-23.pdf>

<https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/family-justice-young-peoples-board/fjyppb-book-in-our-shoes/>

Malcolm Brown, Alan Suggate, Jonathan Chaplin, Anna Rowlands, John Hughes, Alan M. Suggate
Anglican Social Theology: Renewing the Vision Today 2014 (CHP)

MacAlister, J., (2021) The Case for Change: The Independent Review of Children's Social Care

Children's Commissioner for England (2022) Family Review Part 1: Family and its protective effects.