



What is a family?

A new report commissioned by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York calls on all institutions, with a particular focus of the Church of England and Government, to prioritise family life in all decision making and for every person to support and commit to permanent, good quality relationships, whatever form they take. That's a big call! We might say 'family life' is an obvious 'good' which society should prioritise without much questioning. But even writing that shows how limited is my view of society, limited by my history and experience.

The report *Love Matters* is based on theological work, a social history of the family and households, and research on "stable and loving relationships" in a post pandemic society. Why 'post pandemic' is a focus is not clear, suggesting that this is an innovative approach while probably most would agree that the family is important without question.

To ensure a varied contribution, the Report had twelve commission members and additional advisers who contributed from personal experience, alongside input from communities, interfaith leaders, parents, teachers, children and young people, and through surveys and contemporary literature.

The result is a 236 page report, the key points of which I suggest we might have brain-stormed around a cup of coffee, but it is good to see that empirical and statistical evidence supports and develops what we may have put together! But before we feel rather smug, the report cautions us that "families and households are not to be idolised in and of themselves". Family life, however constituted needs support to face the daily challenges of living. Neither should the idea of 'family' be constrained or limited. For all of us, 'family' is a fluid concept over the course of our lives.

Perhaps the pandemic focus reflects how the last two years have affected and changed us. It made me appreciate how much we live in a 'trance' – the normal and predictable. As has been noted, 'no change occurs but by crisis', think about that on the simplest scale to the catastrophic. Personally, because

of the pandemic I seem to have lost the ability to use cash. I must really think to count out coins, as does the befuddled person behind the counter, we both have to check twice! Tangible money has almost left us, we are all 'tap and go'.

The Report cites the pandemic, the cost of living, the war in Ukraine and climate change as examples of challenges that need 'bold remedies'. Indeed they do, suggestions on a post card. Such events create uncertainty, disadvantage and inequality and put the family unit under stress. It is here that the Report calls for family wellbeing to be prioritised with initiatives to provide support.

It has five key messages directed at individuals, religious communities and Government.

- value families in all their diversity;
- support loving and caring relationships, life-long;
- honour singleness and single person households;
- empower and protect children and young people with value and agency;
- and, build a kinder, fairer and more forgiving society by removing discrimination, division, and deep inequality, such as of race and wealth.

Typing these out made me realise how easily my eye can scan over words with little engagement. They are big ideas. Re-reading them carefully challenged me. Could I engage and do something? I could start by just being kinder.

What is family? There is no model of rightness, nor should there be. Families are diverse, have no particular shape or order, can be constituted very differently with people with whom we share no blood relationship.

The Bishop of Durham who co-chaired the commission remarked "there was no "one best shape" for family "except that loving long-term relationships are absolutely key for us all to flourish. Families matter. Relationships matter. Love matters."

The Bible tells us that God is Love, not just that God is 'loving', rather God is the very source of love. Indeed – 'love matters' - not romantic or superficial love, but love mirrored so often in families, which is steadfast, strong, courageous and consistent, whose source is God.

Rev Anne Dunlop
revannedunlop@gmail.com
07929 571522