THE ARCHBISHOP
OF CANTERBURY

Dr Sarah C. Williams is a Commission Member and writes in her personal capacity. The views expressed are not those of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York.

Last week fertility rates hit the BBC headlines. In 2020 the total fertility rate (TFR) for England and Wales fell to 1.58 children per woman, the lowest since records began in 1938. This figure is 4.2% lower than 2019, and 3.1% lower than the previous record low in 2001. Media attention focused on the long-term effects of declining fertility rates on the age structure of the population. With fewer children being born but life expectancy continuing to rise, the future will be characterised by a vast expansion of older, economically dependent members of the community, and far fewer people to look after them.

It is well known that our society is aging. What is less appreciated is that this aging is the last stage of a two century long demographic transition that began c1800 in England. In 1800 the average woman of childbearing age had five children over her lifetime. During the course of the 19th century, improved diet—combined with improvements to sanitation and disease prevention—resulted in declining mortality rates especially among children and infants. For much of the 19th century falling mortality rates reduced the average age of the population and increased the dependency ratio—the number of children to the number of working adults. Population growth exceeded overall growth in economic productivity causing falling living standards and high concentrations of poverty especially among families in rapidly urbanising centres. By the 1860s women bore an average of more than six children and the vast majority did so in impoverished conditions.

But when we compare these women, marrying in the 1860s, with their granddaughters, marrying in the 1910s, the average number of children born to the 'granddaughters' is less than three (2.6 in 1916). This fifty-year period saw rapid demographic transition. Perceptions of parenthood and childhood changed decisively, whilst increased labour productivity enabled the need for old age support to be met by fewer children. As more children survived to adulthood the birth rate began to drop re-channelling flows of intergenerational wealth and reducing the dependency ratio.

For much of the twentieth century the size of the working population continued to grow while the dependency ratio (both of child and elderly) continued to fall. It was not until the end of the 20th century that this two-hundred-year demographic transition entered a final phrase. It was in 1973, after many decades of slow decline, that fertility rates finally fell below the level required to replace the population from one generation to the next thus increasing the dependency ratio once again.

When we step back and look at this broad sweep of history, what we see is a curious and interesting fact. The determining factor in demographic transition is the relationship between the number who depend on others, and the number who can be depended upon. Demographically speaking we are in a strikingly similar situation in the early 21st century to that which prevailed in the first part of the 19th century. We are also experiencing a sharp increase in the dependency ratio. The crucial difference between now and then is this: Today the relative proportion of child (0-15) dependency is roughly half what it was in 1860, while the proportion of elderly (65+) dependency is roughly three times as great.

My reflection is this: Major changes in population groups pivot on the reality of human dependency. Dependency is an inescapable di~~mensi~~on of

what it means to be human. The family is - and will always be - the primary site in which human dependency is mediated and also dignified. Over the next fifty years the future of the family will be tested by care for the elderly, just as it was tested in the 19th century by care for the young.

How our society chooses to cope with 'dependency' remains to be seen. Dependency is not a popular word in our cultural vocabulary. It is possible that in the decades to come, some people will see terminating the lives of elderly family members as a plausible strategy to cope with spiralling costs of care and to activate the redistribution of wealth within families. In such an environment, the multi-generational character of the Church is of vital prophetic significance. With Factory Acts, Sunday Schools, educational reform and widespread philanthropic engagement, the 19th century Church reframed cultural perceptions of the child. Perhaps today, teaching the young to love and honour the old, and supporting relationships between generations inside and outside the family, is mission critical.

4 min read