



Archbishop Justin spoke at the Families and Households Commission Report Launch.

*As delivered:*

I want to start by saying to Professor Walker, Bishop Paul, and to the Commission Members, thank you for this amazing, very punchy, very challenging report. Thank you for the fact that you recognise the diversity of families and households. In that, you've included singleness, but you've also included the fact that the way people form households and families has changed so dramatically over the last forty or fifty years. This report is powerful because, unlike so many reports in the distant past from churches, it doesn't portray the world as we'd like to see it, in an idealised, narrow way. It actually starts where people are. I think, Jan and +Paul, that's because of the hard work you've done. The listening you've done to so many people, quite a lot of whom are here. We've got some amazing people from Eden School, Duke of York Royal Military School in Dover, and one from Newham as well. You've listened very, very widely, and that's been spectacular. Thank you so very much.

Thank you also to our friends at Coram for your hospitality today, and we add to that that your history in families and households goes back a very, very long way. It goes back to the Foundling Hospital, to the point when you were dealing from the beginning of your history at Coram with what we're looking at: how do you make love matter for those who are in secure, happy families and households, and equally for those who are in very different circumstances, coming out of social care?

When Archbishop Stephen and I set this work going, we asked the Commission very specifically to explore what families and households of all shapes and sizes need to flourish today. It's a tough exam question. The launch event took place on Zoom because it was towards the end of the third national lockdown, and we're still only just beginning to understand the scale of the disruption and the challenges caused to family life by the pandemic. Even listening this morning to the radio, I heard a report that the very sharp increase in domestic violence that happened during the pandemic – everyone was expecting it to reverse once the pandemic was over – and in fact it has gone on going up. We don't know the fallout from the pandemic in so many areas. At home, the fact there was fallout is one of the most worrying and concerning things. Your report has come at exactly the right moment.

In the two years since you started work, we've experienced huge political instability at home, and witnessed the first war in Europe for a generation. Huge numbers of families coming with that most ultimate of disruption: separation, usually from the dad, sent to a strange place where they don't have the language, and where every waking moment, they think about the person who is not there: their dad, a brother, serving on the frontline. These are new experiences.

We've mourned the passing of our longest reigning monarch, and we are continuing to live through an acute cost of living crisis which leaves many faced with agonising choices between heating or eating, and some unable to do either. The Commission has been exploring what families and households need to flourish at a time of deep uncertainty and change.

It would have been easy for the response to be reactionary – golden age syndrome could have cut in, with mythical conceptions of the traditional family. But this Commission has done something far more interesting and important; it is rooting our response to changing times by holding fast

to timeless principles, beginning with our commitment to one another in loving service.

The Commission says, quite rightly, that the 'family' is never static; it's always changing, and it always will. We must therefore move away from the idea that a family is always made up of two parents, two children, and a well-behaved dog; very often, almost invariably in my experience, you can take the well-behaved dog out, because we have a very ill-behaved dog – but very often it's not. No one here will only have seen that kind of family. I look around and – Mark Russell, I'm very pleased to see you sitting at the back, the extraordinarily effective chief executive of the Children's Society – and they have been working at greater and greater pressure. Their most recent report with the child mental health crisis, with the work they are doing and planning to address that. These are all areas where the Church and other faith communities are deeply and totally immersed and involved.

Sometimes family represents the people we live with; or it's the people we're related to; or it's the people we choose, or who have chosen us. It talks about the deep structural inequalities that still exist in our country, which are getting worse – let us be clear, they're not going the right way. Children and young people are described, rightly, as resourceful, creative and impressively resilient; but this generation has to be supported to flourish through extraordinary technological changes, mental health challenges, and a lack of value and emphasis in our society on faithful, committed relationships.

Crucially, as I say, the Commission does not lament where we are; it looks at where we could be. It reimagines where we could be if we work together. We are all invited to participate in the pursuit of a kinder, fairer, more forgiving society. The society that learns that great skill that I've seen being learned in a good family, a happy family in which I have the luxury of now living, which I observed in my wife's family and I never experienced in the family I grew up in – that luxury of forgiveness, of people being able to get things wrong and still being loved.

I was doing an interview with someone for the BBC, and I asked them their thoughts on forgiveness. This is someone who has written a lot about families and life together, and they said, I've never really thought about what forgiveness is. That revealed so much.

Finally, we are presented in this report with ambitious, practical and achievable steps that can be taken by institutions and individuals.

The message to institutions – and let the Church put its head up and listen to this – is clear: put families first. Families in the sense of the report. Place the hopes, needs and priorities of families at the centre of an institution's priorities. As institutions, we're encouraged not to think of human beings as autonomous units, but as people who are created for relationship, all of whom are networked, all of whom belong together with others, and who have deep down a desire to give and receive love. As the Church of England, we're asked to set an example, to value families in all their diversity, to honour singleness, to empower children and young people.

But this doesn't only speak to those with institutional power. It speaks to all of us as individuals. Whatever our background, our age, our relationship status, we are called to commit to loving relationships of all kinds that build up others. We are invited to participate in the sacred task of seeking mutual flourishing.

One final anecdote. I have done these two particular interviews for a BBC series this week, and the other one I did on Monday was with the Chief Executive of the Co-op. I was fascinated by that one because the Chief Executive is a Muslim woman, and because of her own experience of family, they have the clearest possible policy of supporting families and households in all their diversity. There's a commercial institution with a history of social action and involvement that is very propound, but reimagining that history for the time we see now, with the way they care for people and people's ability to develop strong and flourishing relationships. No doubt it doesn't always work – it never does in any institution. It can be done in the most unlikely places, even in the Church of England.

Love lies at the heart of this vision; not just love as an emotional feeling (I'm all in favour of that), but rather the kind of love that lasts through thick and thin; the kind of love we see in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – sacrificial, abundant, glorious. This is love as service-in-action.

And so I end where I began: by asking what families and households of all shapes and sizes need to flourish today? The answer is, I think, for all of us to reaffirm what the Commission has noted in three short phrases: family matters; relationships matter; love matters.

Read more about the launch [here](#).

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