

Marriage and Family life

Background

- Christian teaching holds that marriage is central to the stability and health of human society and continues to provide the best context for the raising of children. However marriage is not only a gift to married people and their children but also to their neighbourhoods and networks. Those who are unmarried, either by calling or circumstance, are still advantaged by the honouring of marriage in society. Christians believe therefore that marriage is worth encouraging and supporting for the sake of the common good.
- Whilst most Christians would not wish to see marriage penalised through the tax system, equally most would not wish to see, financial incentives for marriage as implying that the primary purpose of getting married is to maximise tax advantage.
- Support for marriage and its role in the modern family has become one of the defining differences between the social policies of the major parties. Whilst all argue for the importance of strong families for the well being of children, their approaches to policies on family structure and relationship support differ.

Churches Supporting Families

- Churches provide a large percentage of adult relationship education, primarily through the provision of some kind of preparation for marriage. One third of all marriages take place in churches providing safe and sacred places for celebration.
- However the word 'family' is a very emotive word. Often there is a discrepancy between what we *feel* the family should look like and what family lives *actually* look like. 21st century families are characterised by diversity, continuity and change. For years Churches have recognised the importance of providing support and encouragement to all parents and families through parent and toddler groups, contact centres and parenting courses.
- In recent years, various church groups have joined campaigns that support families including: flexible parental working, living wages, and social exclusion, minimum incomes for families, minimum incomes especially pre- and post-pregnancy and incentivising marriage through the tax system.
- In recent years, the parent-child (and now grandparent-child) relationship has been the centre of many initiatives around parenting, as opposed to adult relationship support.

Family Life Statistics

- It is not easy to read the statistics to gain a clear picture of trends in marriage and family life. For example, 2008 saw the lowest marriage rates for England and Wales since they were first calculated in 1862¹. The long-term picture for UK weddings is one of decline, from a peak in 1972². But the divorce rate is also falling and in 2008, it was at its lowest level since 1979. Between 2007 and 2008, the number of divorces granted in the UK fell by 5.5% to 136,026, from 143,955³.
- The number of dependent children living in married couple families in the UK fell by 1 million between 1998 and 2008, to approximately 63% of dependent children. The number of dependent children living with cohabiting couples increased, as did the number living with lone parents, by 0.6 and 0.1 million respectively, representing 13% living with cohabiting couples and 23% living in lone parent

¹ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/marr0210.pdf>

² <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=322>

³ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=170&Pos=1&ColRank=2&Rank=1000>

families. 60% of grandparents looked after grandchildren who were younger than 15⁴.

- These trends were driven by changes in family formation and separation, as well as an increase in the proportion of births outside marriage⁵. Many children will experience life in different types of family structure over time, particularly when their parents start or end a partnership.

Marriage and Family – Choice and Necessity

- Political statements about marriage may reflect a belief that the diversity of family structures has resulted from the exercise of free choices – and this may be either celebrated and accepted, or countered by encouraging marriage, over other choices. Less talked about is the correlation between economics, employment and family structure. Although marriage is still highly regarded and aspired to by most⁶, studies show that unmarried parenthood is more concentrated for mothers under 25⁷ who are less likely to be employed and live in the poorer parts of the UK. Parents who are married are more likely to be older, employed, and form the norm in areas of affluence. This leads some to argue that marriage does not create stability, rather it is a symptom of it⁸ and that the circumstances of those with lower incomes impede commitment to marriage. Without education and steady employment, people are not going to commit to marriage even if they are given financial incentives.
- Policy arguments often turn upon the degree to which economic circumstances are seen to determine choices or, conversely, the extent to which choices about marriage and family life are matters of individual moral formation. To claim that outcomes are only about economics or only about morality is to over-simplify a complex of motives, incentives and attitudes.
- There is also a tendency amongst politicians and others to assume that correlations imply causation. Individual cases will often contradict trends and policy makers have the difficult task of encouraging socially desirable choices without harming those who find themselves in situations which they have not chosen.

Questions

- How can we provide an environment that encourages people to make commitments in their private lives? Should the Government be providing tax incentives for those who are married? If so, what type of incentives would they want to see?
- If in Government, would candidates support the role of the voluntary agencies in providing relationships education and counselling?

Further information

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⁴ Clarke L and Roberts C (2003): Grandparenthood: its meaning and its contribution to older people's lives *'Growing older programme: Research study 22'*

⁵ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=2193&Pos=1&ColRank=2&Rank=1000>

⁶ For example Civitas IPSOS Mori poll in 2008 where 70% of people aged 20 -35 in Britain aspire to marriage

⁷ <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/births1209.pdf>

⁸ Anastasia De Waal book also Guardian 21st May 2008