

Church Society's response to the Government Green paper *Supporting Families*

Summary response

We welcome the focus on the family and the plans to take positive action.

The report lacks foundation, offering no clear understanding of families or their purpose. This causes concern in how principles can be worked out in practice.

There is a failure to identify marriage as the bedrock of families and society.

The report fails to recognise that parents are the best people to raise their children and puts too much stress on getting parents out to work.

The report leans on trends and fads in social theory rather than the wisdom of God and the experience of the ages.

A solid foundation for the family

Supporting Families lacks solid foundations. We offer the following observations:

Marriage (between a man and a woman) is the only proper place for children. In general children need male and female parents and the security of a stable and committed relationship. Traditional marriage offers both of these, even when it falls short of the ideal.

Families are social, they are the basic unit of society and exist in large part for the benefit and propagation of the wider community, they are neither private nor isolated.

Historically, societies that failed to uphold the family and the sanctity of marriage soon collapsed.

God gives us in the Bible a pattern for human society which is drawn out in the marriage services of the Established Church. The Government would be unwise to ignore the God-giveness of marriage.

It is given by God:

- as the place for raising children and therefore for the benefit of the wider community and the furtherance of the human race;
- as the place for sexual intimacy, and it should be exclusively so; and,
- as the place of mutual support and strengthening, again for the benefit not just of individuals but of the wider community.

With these initial observations this response moves to more detailed comment on the report.

Detailed Comments

Chapter 1

It is possible that proposed National Family and Planning Institute will prove beneficial. However, we fear that it will actually be harmful to families. Since Supporting Families does not explain what a family is or its purpose it is likely that such an Institute would prove a means for people to promote their particular social theories. Whilst on the surface the

Institute seems like a good idea it is likely that it will lead to unnecessary interference in family life and the de-skilling of ordinary parents by so called 'experts'.

We commend to the Government instead the work already being done by many organisations which are local, personally involved and in touch with those who need help. Churches in particular have done a great deal without any central planning, providing a whole range of support, advice and activities for families.

Chapter 2

There is no need to make it financially beneficial to marry. However, if a couple chooses for only one of to work then the taxation system should encourage this. There are three reasons for this.

It is best for parents to raise their children.

Increasingly couples care for elderly or other relatives, who are also part of their family. This broader dimension to families does not seem to be recognised in *Supporting Families*.

Many use such opportunities to engage in all manner of voluntary work.

The erosion and now scrapping of the Married Couples' Allowance is regrettable. Marriage is thereby being devalued and so too is caring and voluntary work.

Supporting Families seems to assume that it is best to encourage both parents to be in paid employment and is geared towards facilitating this. We believe this to be a principle driven by economics rather than social concern and that, in the long run, it will be detrimental to families and to national life. We challenge the Government to be bold in reaffirming the value of caring and voluntary work and in encouraging those who choose to contribute to society in these ways rather than through paid employment.

Policies that endeavour to help single parents are obviously important but there is a fine line to be walked. What is required at this time is the encouragement of commitment and stability in marriage and the recognition that in general children are far better being brought up by two (male and female) parents. Social policy must not further undermine the value of two parent families and there is a danger that undue focusing on single parents is having this effect.

Chapter 3

So long as the reservations expressed regarding the last chapter are borne in mind there is much which is good in this chapter. It is particularly important that families are encouraged to spend time together and we welcome the initiatives proposed which will help in this way, including family friendly employment practices.

It is also essential that the Government reintroduce legislation to restrict Sunday trading. The command of God to keep one day special has a clear social dimension (expressed in the fourth commandment). Today, as in the past, where both parents work, they are often not at home together, this damages family life. However, in the past keeping Sunday special protected families, particularly such working families, because there was one day when they would have time together. The decision, economically driven, to disregard God's law is serving to undermine the family and therefore society. We fear that we will only learn with time the folly and cost of our arrogance.

The other major concern with this section is the focus on 'rights'. In other places this is balanced with 'responsibilities' but it is to be feared that a society that becomes obsessed with rights is in fact becoming obsessed with protecting ourselves from others. Family policy in particular would do better to stress our duties and responsibilities which is far

more consistent with the biblical Christian heritage of this nation.

Chapter 4

Again we recognise some very good proposals in this chapter, such as providing preparation for marriage and support for relationships, particularly at times of stress and when there is conflict which may lead to breakdown. However, Supporting Families fails to recognise the importance of marriage as foundation of families and therefore focuses too much on children. It is also in relation to preparation that the failure to identify the basis of marriage and families is of most concern, how can people be prepared unless someone knows what they are being prepared for?

Our fears are heightened by the fact that preparation seems to consist in talking about rights and responsibilities with particular focus on finance and property. We commend instead the important 'responsibilities' that are set out in the marriage services of the Church of England and grounded in scripture. Marriage preparation would be effective if it took these statements and sought to explain them and encourage couples to see how they work in practice.

The whole concept of prenuptial contracts is to any Christian an absurdity. If a marriage is being entered into with the assumption that it may not last, and contingency plans laid, then it is not being entered into for life and should not therefore be entered into at all.

Chapter 5

There are a vast range of areas addressed in this chapter and Church Society has a distinctive contribution to make on some of these:

Supporting Families wisely says that it is not right 'to ban all physical punishment'. Evidence from other countries, in particular Sweden, shows that such bans cause rather than solve social problems. The teaching of the Bible and of past ages is far more sensible and beneficial than fleeting fashions.

With regards teenage pregnancy we wonder when people will wake up to the fact that more and more sex education and the free availability of contraception has led and will lead to more teenage pregnancies and not less. What is being created by these policies, and by the media, is a culture of promiscuity. This is fuelled by the appalling example given by those in positions of leadership in the nation, not least politicians. Supporting Families, as it stands, offers no hope of addressing this problem but will, rather, make it worse.

Final comment

We reiterate again that we welcome the attention being given to families but believe that Supporting Families is sadly lacking mainly because it fails to show any clear understanding of what a family is, its purpose, or that marriage must be at its heart. The opening remarks condemn the rhetoric of the past which was not accompanied by policy which was therefore ineffectual. We fear however that Supporting Families consists of policy without foundation and will therefore be harmful.

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on behalf of the Council