

**“Not Easy But Full of Meaning”  
Catholic Family Life in 2004**



**A report of the findings of  
Listening 2004: My Family My Church**

**Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales**

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Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales  
39 Eccleston Square, London  
SW1V 1BX

ccn@bccew.org.uk  
www.catholicchurch.org.uk

Redemptorist Publications,  
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GU34 3HQ

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Email: brandnew@rock.com.

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# Contents

The Listening 2004 Prayer.....	5
Foreword.....	7
Summary.....	10
Chapter 1. Family Life and the Changing World .....	13
Values: Media, Materialism and Peer Pressure .....	13
Balancing Family, Work and Home .....	16
Changing Family Structures .....	20
Mobility and Communications .....	22
Hurting Families .....	24
Listening to Young People.....	26
What Can We Learn From This? .....	27
Chapter 2. Family Life and Living the Faith .....	31
Valuing Faith in God .....	31
Communicating Faith in God.....	33
Lost Generations .....	39
Sharing Faith in God at Home .....	40
Family Spirituality .....	41
Family Faith at Home – Family Faith in the Parish.....	43
Listening to Young People.....	44
What Can We Learn From This? .....	45
Chapter 3. Our Beliefs and Pastoral Practices .....	49
Are We Engaging with Real or Ideal Families? .....	49
Valuing Difference.....	51
Consistency of Pastoral Practice.....	54
Gender, Sexuality and Fertility .....	55
Single People .....	60
Inter-Church Families .....	61
Divorce and the Eucharist.....	62
What Can We Learn From This? .....	65
Chapter 4. Family Needs: Priorities for Church and Family .....	69
1 Welcoming, Family-Sensitive Parish Communities .....	69
2 Marital and Family Spirituality.....	71
3 Equipping Parents for Passing on Faith.....	72
Clarity of Communication .....	74
Where do we go from here?.....	74
Appendix 1: Methodology .....	77
Appendix 2: What the Bishops Said .....	83
Appendix 3: Text of the Listening 2004 Brochure .....	87
Appendix 4: Diocesan Coordinators of Listening 2004 .....	89
Appendix 5: Some Family Support Groups & Organisations .....	91

At their Spring meeting in 2005 the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales welcomed the report *Not Easy But Full of Meaning: Catholic Family Life in 2004*, and authorised its publication in the name of the Conference.

It further endorsed the proposed development of collaborative work from 2005-2008 on three priorities emerging from the process:

1. A need for welcoming, family-sensitive, friendly parishes where Christian community thrives and sustains the lives of those both at its heart and on the margins;
2. A need to deepen and share among laity and clergy alike a much wider understanding of marital and family spirituality as the heart of the domestic church;
3. A need to explore and better understand what we mean by passing on faith in God, the primary role of parents and to equip them accordingly.

Further information on Listening 2004 and the plan of collaborative action is available from:

Elizabeth Davies, Marriage & Family Life Project Officer  
Department for Christian Responsibility & Citizenship  
Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales  
39 Eccleston Square  
London SW1V 1BX

Email: [daviese@bcew.org.uk](mailto:daviese@bcew.org.uk)  
[www.listening2004.org.uk](http://www.listening2004.org.uk)

## The Listening 2004 Prayer

Loving Father,  
since today as never before, your work is in our hands,  
we, your family,  
in all our frailty and mystery,  
with all our races and peoples,  
join hands around your table,  
in doubt, in love, in risk, in hope,  
and offer you thanks in a new way.  
Not by being taken out of what is human  
but by daring to be what we truly are:  
the work of your loving hands.

Since we, your people,  
are those who have not seen,  
yet are called upon to believe the mystery of faith,  
send over us your Holy Spirit:  
the Spirit who brings us life,  
the Spirit who brings us love,  
the Spirit who makes all we do  
not easy but full of meaning.

We make this prayer in the name  
of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen



## Foreword

1. The formative experience of family is core to each individual's identity. Even in senior years, reflection on 'who I think I am' inevitably includes reflection on the formative influences in my life, generally understood to be most powerful during the impressionable years of childhood. If it is true that family plays a major role in shaping each one of us then family requires the most careful attention by both society and church.

2. Our Catholic church has always recognised the importance of marriage and family life. In recent years, our church in England and Wales has reviewed our understanding of the formative role of school and parish. This has led to an ever greater understanding of the core formative influence of the family. Aware of the changes in parish and school since our own early experiences of both, the bishops in our two countries decided to give priority to a review of marriage and family in the light of today's world, today's culture and today's church.

3. In 2004 the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales produced a teaching document *Cherishing Life* which, among other things, sets out the vision of the Church's teaching on marriage and family life<sup>1</sup>. While exercising this teaching office, the bishops also exercised their listening office. This report is an account of the responses to *Listening 2004: My Family My Church*, a series of diocesan conversations on marriage and family life, the bishops' effort to learn more about the needs of families, and how they might be met.

4. Our church is truly blessed with clear teaching. Change can either be a help or a threat to our teaching and to our values about marriage and family life. We need to listen to the current lived reality of families if we are to understand the pastoral needs of today's marriages and family homes. This was the genesis of *Listening 2004*, an exercise embraced by all the Catholic dioceses of England and Wales. A short questionnaire<sup>2</sup>, devised by the *Listening 2004* co-ordinators from all the dioceses, was distributed to parishes, schools and homes throughout our countries.

5. The process was, of course, in the spirit of the documents of the Second Vatican Council which recommended that we in the local church be able to explicitly "recognise and understand the world in which we live, its expectations, its longings and its often dramatic characteristics"<sup>3</sup> and that individual laity might have an opportunity to "manifest their opinion on those things which pertain to the good of the Church."<sup>4</sup> The dynamic nature of the Church as 'Communio' is expressed in Canon 212. This report expresses something of the trust that exists between Christ's faithful and the Pastors of

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<sup>1</sup> See especially sections 9-12 and 96-146

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 3

<sup>3</sup> Gaudium et Spes #4

<sup>4</sup> Lumen Gentium #37.

the Church envisaged by this Canon which encourages the laity to make known their needs and views. The very title of this project, *Listening 2004*, reflects the bishops' respect for the 'sensus fidei.'

6. Both individual dioceses and parishes have at any one time their own pastoral priorities, but it was a sign of the recognised importance of marriage and family life that *every* diocese participated to the best of its ability. The survey was designed to be a qualitative not a quantitative one. The questions on the leaflet were designed to promote conversation and reflection rather than elicit facts and figures. Because of the open nature of the questions, the leaflets were not as easy to complete as swiftly as if they had been designed for 'tick box' responses. There were two consequences to this strategy: only a small proportion of the million leaflets printed were returned (0.03-6%) yet the quality of the replies was extremely impressive<sup>5</sup>.

7. This report is all about people's experiences expressed in their own words. Frequently we heard from dioceses that the leaflets provoked very worthwhile discussions among people who never got round to formulating written responses. Although some dioceses took great care to reach out with the brochure to those people whose voice is not normally present in the church context, it has to be recognised that the vast majority of responses are from the church faithful. We would be foolish to believe that we have heard from *all* the Catholic community. Those who see themselves to be on the fringes have important things to say to us and we need to keep listening to them whenever possible.

8. The project was called *Listening 2004: My Family My Church*. The quality of listening is all important in such an exercise. There is a tendency, even in one to one listening, to hear what is being said only in order to respond with answers or solutions. Aware of this tendency, we in our Church need to open our hearts to hear each other deeply, rather than just give answers. Again and again on the diocesan listening days individuals spoke of how wonderful it was to be able to speak their reality in a church context. They experienced being heard and accepted, rather than being 'put right'. On these occasions we all recognised that as fellow members of our church we adhered to a body of teaching, but accepted each other's reality and experience at that particular stage of their journey in faith. More than once appreciation was expressed that we were having a true conversation about the lived reality of our faith and that such conversation gave rise to a healthier culture in the church.

9. 'My Church' was part of the title of this project, but it became very evident as we listened at the diocesan conversations that people were speaking out of different models of church. The words of participants quoted in this report reflect this clearly. In no way does this detract from the value of the contributions to these discussions. Rather, a recognition of these different starting points often leads to greater understanding of the views expressed and, indeed, of peoples' lived experience of family and church.

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<sup>5</sup> Only three dioceses had a return rate of less than 1.5% and a total of 15,000 families contributed a response in some form. Even 1.5% response is apparently considered to be high by those experienced in similar surveys. Further information on the methodology is included in Appendix 1.



10. As I have mentioned, this report is essentially an account of the issues raised during the conversations. However it also includes accounts from written responses. It was not possible to include everything and everyone within the constraints of a diocesan family listening day. But within the limitations of a document of this size we have faithfully tried to reflect all that was shared while paying due attention to the minority voices that are, in some ways, no less significant. It has also been impossible for us in these pages to describe the format and content of each diocesan day. Dioceses were encouraged to implement *Listening 2004* in their own 'style' and as a result we experienced great variety and richness on each occasion.

11. The frequent use of the pronoun 'we' in this report needs clarifying. According to its context, 'we' refers to the combination of the Chair of the Bishops' Conference Marriage and Family Life Committee and the national Project Officer (who were present at all diocesan days and collated this report) or to the actual experience of all involved in a particular diocesan day listening to each other. This is a report for the bishops, who, it should be noted, were all present to listen to their own diocesan family. But it is also a report for the people of God who took part and, indeed, for those who did not take part. It is both a document of record and a tool for our future direction.

12. The New Testament vision for marriage as Covenant and Sacrament is inspiring and challenging. Why did this listening exercise not then concentrate on marriage rather than on family? This question engendered much discussion prior to the launch of the project. The majority of diocesan coordinators expressed strong views that 'marriage' alone would be exclusive in the sense that those who are not married might feel disenfranchised. Yet their experience is crucial to the consideration of any realistic pastoral response for the future. Also, people do not easily open their hearts about their husband/wife relationship since it is essentially intimate, private and very particular to each couple. Discussion of personal family life is a slightly less high risk area, but inevitably involves reflection on the couple relationship where applicable. A good number of the diocesan listening days had open forum sessions, which were often too large for everyone to feel comfortable in personal sharing (though the Diocese of Middlesbrough's day took place very successfully in open forum), but quite frequently issues of marriage support for couples featured in the smaller group conversations.

13. Families have been around since the dawn of human creation. Is it not spurious to talk about dramatic change in the nature of families in our generation when they have stood the test of time? Undoubtedly the core human needs, such as to love, to be loved and to belong are the same as they ever were. But how are families formed or distorted by today's pressures and influences, and how do we, the church family respond to each other's needs for pastoral support in order to be true to our understanding of Christ's teaching, which is never less than challenging? If this initiative raises marriage and family life higher on our pastoral agenda at the local level it will have been successful.

+ John Hine

Auxiliary Bishop of Southwark.

Chair of the Bishop's Conference Committee for Marriage and Family Life.

## Summary

In 2004 the Bishops of England and Wales asked families to talk about what life is really like for them: their joys and sorrows, their hopes. Over 15,000 families responded. Every diocese listened to them in one way or another. So what did families say?

### Family Life in a Changing World

Families are under a lot of pressure: too little time, too much to do just living, working and caring for each other, not enough understanding, help and appreciation from society or the church. We heard a lot about loneliness and not being welcome. Materialist values portrayed on TV and in the newspapers don't help. But families said that faith in God and a prayer life does. So too do patience, humour, tolerance and good family communication. Families are grateful for today's health, social and educational benefits. But their greatest blessing by far is that of simply being together as a family.

*"James scored a goal and only the childminder saw it."*

*"There are 3 and now 4 generations to cope with: elderly parents often need more help when the younger family needs help."*

*"The main difficulty? Competing demands on our time: from work, children, leisure, even church!"*

*"I have a big family - 6 children & 15 grandchildren. I'm a widow. It's lonely very often. Family are busy."*

### **The report covers five important areas:**

- **Values: media, materialism and peer pressure**
- **Balancing family, work and home**
- **Changing family structures**
- **Mobility and communications**
- **Hurting families**

### Family Life and Living the Faith

Families talked a lot about faith in God and how it provides structure and strength, meaning and hope in their lives. But they also said that faith and religious practices are difficult areas, especially where families disagree, children reject the faith and family members are excluded from full participation in the Mass.

*"Families are the best thing on earth. It doesn't matter if you break up, if you are a different skin colour or how people are, it just matters that you love them."*

*"The friends we have at church enrich our lives and give us spiritual support for the right choices."*

*"An awful lot of young people see the Church as irrelevant - not just those who have not been taught or brought up properly."*

*"If only the Church could free us of the constant question 'Where did we go wrong?'"*

*"It is God who has called us to a Christian marriage, who supports us and helps us to grow as persons in our family life, and who in and through our family relationships draws us into communion with God, Father, Son and Spirit."*

*“I feel unable to talk about religion or church matters. My children ridicule my prayer life.”*

**The report covers six important areas:**

- **Valuing faith in God**
- **Communicating faith in God**
- **The lost generations**
- **Sharing faith in God at home**
- **Family spirituality**
- **Family faith at home and in the parish**

Our Beliefs and Pastoral Practices

Church teaching, especially on divorce and remarriage, was talked about. Some families requested greater generosity, forgiveness and welcome from the church. Others asked for more information and clearer teaching. Most recognised the importance of the parish as the place where we should all be known, loved and welcomed for who we are, where different experiences of family life are respected and where moral and practical support is available.

*“We should be as forgiving in the broader Church as we are at home with our own families. We shouldn’t let our values slip but be honest with people. We have to offer acceptance and challenge.”*

*“It is difficult and stressful to bring our autistic child to church, both for us and him.”*

*“Family life will always seem second best when celibacy is held up as the ideal.”*

*“As a single person, I find nothing applicable to my circumstances in this form.”*

*“We have been unable to have children and feel such a failure at Mass.”*

**The report covers seven important areas:**

- **Engaging with ‘real’ or ‘ideal’ families?**
- **Valuing difference**
- **Consistency of pastoral practice**
- **Gender, sexuality and fertility**
- **Single people**
- **Inter-church families**
- **Divorce and the Eucharist**

What next?

Families had many practical ideas. Local action was a priority, though it needed support. Many volunteered to be part of the follow-up. So in April 2005 the Bishops of England and Wales agreed a plan to meet families’ needs in three stages over the next three years:

**Welcoming, family-friendly parishes**

- to offer understanding, friendship and support
- to be a source of help in times of need
- to encourage and celebrate all family life whether married, widowed, single, divorced, separated, with children or without

*“The challenge is to build highly loving supportive communities within our parishes for all of us, including our families.”*

**Marital and family spirituality**

- to share the holiness of our homes as places of life, love, service, teaching, fellowship, witness and prayer
- to celebrate the presence of God as love in all loving family relationships

*“A broader understanding of marital and family spirituality among both clergy and laity will be fundamental to the success of any future work by the church in support of family life.”*

**Helping parents and grandparents to passing on faith in God**

- to provide more support, tools and resources
- to respect the role of the home and to see where it fits in with the school and the parish
- to provide comfort and healing when necessary

*“Parents expressed a need for more help in raising their children in the Faith, both in terms of deepening their own understanding and being able to integrate it into the life of the home.”*

**The Bishops of England and Wales would like to thank everyone who took part in any way in Listening 2004: My Family My Church**

## Chapter 1. Family Life and the Changing World

14. One of the aims of *Listening 2004: My Family My Church* was to establish what life is really like for families right now. We live in an age when any number of statistics and research reports can be quoted to prove and disprove a range of theories about the state of contemporary family life. Frequently there is much anxiety about this within the church, because societal change seems to have accompanied a decline in active church membership and attendance. With the bishops of England and Wales keen to offer constructive help and support to families it was essential that we, as a church, establish a picture of family life that is as close to the reality as possible. What do families themselves think about their lives in twenty-first century Britain? What are their everyday lives really like? What are their joys, sorrows and hopes? How are they surviving? What is important to them? What do they want their church to know about their family life right now?

15. A whole section of the *Listening 2004* brochure (see Appendix 3) was devoted to questions about 'the world' - family life as experienced in the local area, the wider community and in today's society. But we soon noticed that responses to questions in the other sections about the home and the church also reflected the wider reality of the world in which families live. Despite concerns that these brochures gave insufficient space for written responses, we were told repeatedly that families were effectively conveying their vital concerns with a frankness that was often extremely moving. A presenter in Clifton was not alone in noting a sense of 'treading on holy ground' when reading families' written responses. As brochures were returned, recurring themes were collated to be shared with the participants in the diocesan conversation. As we visited diocese after diocese it became abundantly clear that the same themes were surfacing over and over again.

16. The responses to *Listening 2004* illustrate the pressures that families are currently experiencing in many areas of their lives, largely through external forces, mostly not of their making and over which they often feel that they have little control or influence. If they cope, families do so in a variety of ways, often drawing on their faith and prayer life. But families also experience the world, with all its changes, as a positive benefit. Gratitude and appreciation for the many social and community benefits enjoyed in twenty-first century Britain was frequently expressed. The picture of family life in a changing world is complex.

### Values: Media, Materialism and Peer Pressure

17. The highest number of responses to the question about difficulties experienced as a family in the world illustrated the challenges of living as Christian families in a world where their values are not shared. Respondents did not always clarify which particular values were an issue but some did:

“Pressure on appearance, consumerism, selfishness, non-permanent relationships, competition and Godlessness.” (Nottingham)

“Obsession with celebrity and material wealth.” (Arundel & Brighton)

18. The frequency of responses mentioning materialism, consumerism, individualism, the media and peer pressure suggest that all these factors are closely connected to families' concerns about conflicting values.

“There was a sense of struggling against an increasingly secular society, where practising the Faith makes you distinctly odd. Media and materialism have an effect on children however much we try to live by gospel values, and peer pressure and the media influence parents and children alike.” (Wrexham)

“A high percentage reflected on problems with children whilst being inundated with non-Christian messages through an easily accessible media. Many felt that they were swimming against the tide of materialism and the message that promiscuity was acceptable in society. There was a groundswell of opinion that believed that the government promoted materialism and that the Church leaders were not countering this message in any relevant manner.” (Forces)

“The difficulties highlighted are those felt by many in a world preoccupied with materialism and constant focus on money. These cause tensions, arguments and increased parental stress.” (Birmingham)

In Lancaster we heard that approximately 50% more families identified ‘success measured by material wealth’ as their major difficulty than those who identified the influence on children by the media as a problem.

19. Families repeatedly expressed the hope that the wider community would offer them friendship, respect and acceptance.

“We hope for support, understanding, friendship, respect for our values.” (Nottingham)

“Understanding, respect not ridicule or persecution for those choosing the Christian way of life.” (Arundel & Brighton)

This overwhelming desire for acceptance, friendship and understanding suggests that Catholic families are not experiencing these to any great degree in the modern world. At the Forces listening day the coordinator commented that a decrease in family values had, in his view, come about as a result of a decline in valuing of family. We might therefore legitimately ask what a society that values family would look like? Moreover, to whom or where can families otherwise look for the friendship, approval, acceptance and understanding that they clearly need?

20. The media featured significantly in the responses. One coordinator noted that they came in for ‘a bit of a bashing’. The media were often blamed for promoting the values that caused families difficulty. Typical comments were: ‘TV makes the abnormal normal;’ ‘It is the media which leads society and its portrayal of family life is not helpful.’ Certainly many described the media as promoting unrealistic expectations of life.

“We live in a society where it is dangerous to fail and where we only count if we are successful, beautiful and have the right lifestyle. Young people particularly are falling victim to the image and success culture. When they see themselves as

not coming up to scratch, they easily develop feelings of failure and can fall into depression.” (Liverpool)

“Materialism and mass communication have a great influence on families in today’s world. Society’s attitudes on many things have an effect on families. Abortion, contraception, homosexuality, divorce, teenage pregnancy and issues of justice and peace are all massively discussed in the media and impact on everyone’s outlook and opinion.” (Cardiff)

21. The Catholic Association for Racial Justice pointed out the negative impact of the media on stereotyping cultural differences:

“A lot of media coverage about developing countries is negative, which gives the wrong impression about their way of life, the dynamics and the resilience of its people.”

22. Yet families in almost equal measure appreciated the power of the media to bring the world into their homes. Communications technology was experienced as a major blessing, facilitating a level of awareness that enabled assistance to be provided to those in need and fostering greater understanding of national and global issues. We also heard that the media promoted greater tolerance of cultural and social diversity through its ability to portray such differences in empathetic ways. The leisure opportunities provided via the media were also valued.

“We are sometimes a bit stressed out but something as simple as watching a video at home together sorts us out.” (Cardiff)

23. Peer pressure was a difficulty identified for all ages: teenagers, young adults and families. It produced behaviour patterns that were not considered healthy or good for family life.

“Peer pressure wins at the expense of parental advice and it is very difficult to keep firm values in a secular environment. There is intense pressure on young people to ‘keep up with the Jones’s’ and with credit cards/store cards so readily available, debt is proving a major problem. Many also are starting their working life with large student debts and graduation loans.” (Shrewsbury)

“Peer pressure means that teenagers know it all and anything goes. Very selfish society. What can you do other than go with the flow? Help!” (Plymouth)

24. In a number of conversations around the question of values participants highlighted the complexity of the picture:

“Our group questioned the difference between moral and religious values and secular ones. This query was expressed through a question: “Is it better to be a good person or a bad Catholic?” There are good influences in our society now that were not present in the past. A respect for people of all colours, creeds and nations and an awareness of man’s responsibility for the environment were two such examples. Today’s society is much more open than it was in previous generations and one of the consequences of this is that young people are faced with many more choices at an earlier age than would have been normal in previous times.” (Menevia)

25. On the whole, where families do cope with conflicting values and associated problems, they said that they do so by talking things through, by giving good witness (i.e. by modelling or practising their values) and by prayer. The support of a like-minded community such as the parish is also very important to families that enjoy this resource, as are extended family and friends.

“We try to discuss this and offer spiritual alternatives.” (Arundel & Brighton)

“We seek support from parents with similar values.” (Wrexham)

“We cope through prayer, mutual respect and helpfulness.” (Salford)

## **Balancing Family, Work and Home**

26. Despite increasing social and government awareness of the need to support families in balancing their work and home lives we noted little evidence that recent policies had had any immediate impact. In fact we heard a large amount of evidence in every diocese that showed families really struggling to survive economically and to make ends meet financially. There is no doubt that this is having a serious impact on their emotional health and on the quality of their relationships.

“Work schedules are a problem making it almost impossible for the whole family to be together at times.” (Arundel & Brighton)

“Husband’s job stress pretty unbearable and comes home with him. I feel second in importance to the job, even if this is not the case. Wish I could change the set up and work for him – but I can’t. I do feel helpless. I don’t really cope.” (Plymouth)

“The family is torn apart by work ethics, two working parents, money, untrained parish priests and no Catholic support.” (Middlesbrough)

“The financial burden is enormous. Money is an issue, and we both have to work to sustain a minimum living standard for the family. Working means that you cannot be there for them when they might need you. Schools put an extra burden on the children with the constant treadmill of exams and assessments. Do they really need that? Working shifts means my husband and I see little of each other and our motivation dries up at 11 p.m. at night when I come home.” (nk)

27. We heard of a culture that is child-centred and which therefore encourages parents to be child-centred. With both parents working, what little leisure time there is often centres on being together as a family, pushing the couple relationship, if there is one, to the back burner. Yet parents naturally prioritise their children’s welfare as their primary responsibility. One couple referred to their children as their joint ‘life project’, which suggests that they viewed bringing up their children as something which enhanced their relationship. Certainly time together as a family was highly prized. Over and over again, way ahead by far of any other family joy (or difficulty) expressed, we heard of the joy of simply being together, sometimes in times of gathering and celebration, but often in the ordinary daily routines of eating together or watching TV. This discovery is surely



something to celebrate in a church that understands 'being together' as 'the good par excellence'<sup>6</sup> of marriage and family life.

"Sharing outings including shopping, closeness, fidelity, trust, sex, prayer."  
(Nottingham)

"Celebrating family life, birthdays, Christmas, Easter, marriages, achievements and just thanking God for all that he has given us." (Middlesbrough)

"Trust, love, friendship, marriages and births, working through difficult times, growing stronger as a unit." (Westminster)

"The times we share are precious, even in times of sadness or strife (these) are always valued." (Salford)

"Incredible love generated between us. Watching children growing up and being together. Seeing the children's generosity and awareness. Enjoying quiet family times, walks and sitting around the fire." (Plymouth)

28. These moments are clearly significant in the life of a family, contributing to a sense of togetherness and providing cohesion while reinforcing family identity. The good times seem to 'charge up' the family's 'batteries', providing the necessary emotional resources to survive the more challenging moments.

"Giving and receiving love within a secure family unit was the foundation for the strength to cope with the struggles both within and outside the family." (Forces)

Yet, as one participant observed, there seems to be a paradox between families enjoyment of and need for 'togetherness' and their ability to achieve it when faced with all the other demands on their time.

29. The balancing or juggling of competing needs is undeniably one of the major sources of stress within the home. Financial pressures mean that both parents usually have to work outside the home, though this is not without some feelings of ambivalence or even guilt on their part, especially for women, the traditional primary care-givers. This was occasionally compounded by what some mothers sensed as judgemental attitudes on the part of the older generation. Lack of choice was often a huge frustration.

"Women are expected to work/clean and be responsible for the children. I do not really cope and end up feeling guilty." (Plymouth)

"James scored a goal and only the childminder saw it." (Shrewsbury)

"The group definitely felt that the Government needed to give more support for families and marriage through their policies. The tax system seemed to be skewed towards forcing both parents to work, even with very young children in the home. The values of our present society were purely material rather than spiritual. They need to legislate to enable mothers to stay at home in the early years."

(Middlesbrough)

30. The cost of housing was pointed out as one of the factors in this pressure to work, but also the debts that build up these days from young adulthood, with student loans and the easy availability of credit.

"The cost of housing is prohibitive; we are in danger of keeping property from the

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<sup>6</sup> Pope John Paul II. Letter to Families 1994 #15.

majority of young families. Financial concerns can cripple family life. ‘Family’ then is not necessarily that calm centre of peace that one would hope for.”

(Shrewsbury)

“Housing is a difficulty – young adults cannot afford to buy in this area.”

(Arundel & Brighton)

31. When parents work they often manage the care of their children by working flexible hours so that one or the other parent can be at home. There is no doubt that this is a great asset to families. Not only do they save on childcare costs but they also retain the time with their children that is so important for healthy family relationships. But flexible working is a double-edged sword. It can play havoc with the couple or single-adult need for refreshment and recreation and with the negotiation of a balance between the needs of self and others. If parents are always working, house-keeping or child-rearing where do they find the time to renew themselves or offload some of the stress that builds up?

“Difficulty is managing work/home life and getting opportunities to talk. We snatch moments – we use meal times for discussions.” (Salford)

“Finding time to be together is the greatest difficulty.” (East Anglia)

32. We also heard of difficulties in family life that arise from internal rather than external pressures. Children have a multitude of activities these days and parents often seem to find themselves under the further strain of facilitating these: becoming taxi drivers in a sense. Some parents also feel pressured to give to their children in material terms.

“When everyone is poor, it is not so bad to be poor, but when everyone is well off it is very hard to be badly off.” (Shrewsbury)

“Parents give in to their children to compensate for the fact that they are not there for them (because of work etc) so boundaries are blurred for fear of saying ‘no’.”

(Menevia)

33. We heard from grandparents who felt that they were often the ones taking the strain of the dual-earner economy, stepping in while parents were at work. For these grandparents retirement did not bring respite from responsibility and in some cases, this kind of interdependence complicated relationships with adult children. Grandparent care can strengthen family relationships particularly across generations, but it often requires a balancing act where agreement on child-rearing practices cannot be assumed. Younger grandparents, we heard, are also often still caring for their own parents.

“There are 3 and now 4 generations to cope with: elderly parents often need more help when the younger family needs help.” (Portsmouth)

34. Families often did not cope well with the strains and stresses of modern life. But when they did they mentioned the help given by extended family and friends and those times of togetherness which made up for all the heartache. Families often made extra efforts to prioritise time together against all other demands. They mentioned going for walks together. They found creative ways to fit everything in.

“The fact that most women work makes family visiting more difficult. We cope by having an ‘open’ home for all the family at any time.” (Plymouth)

But sometimes families found themselves under so much pressure that even their home time could become work time.

“Employers set targets that have to be met and in order to do that work is brought home.” (Shrewsbury)

35. This aspect of the reality of family life is extremely significant for the parish and wider church community. It's only too easy to assume that families absent themselves from parish activities due to lack of commitment or lack of faith. After listening to families it seems more likely that they are highly stressed and being forced into choices that in an ideal world they would rather not have to make.

“The main difficulty? Competing demands on our time: from work, children, leisure, even church! So many people and organisations need help, and there never seems to be enough volunteers.” (Cardiff)

“A feeling of guilt pervades as the church community is often neglected due to our own family and work commitments.” (Portsmouth)

It's not only parish communities that suffer as a result of the stresses on family time. Some families noted the impact on local communities.

“There is no neighbour support as most mums work; all government and tax incentives are aimed at getting women to work.” (Shrewsbury)

36. All that we heard suggests that life at the family ‘coalface’ is often messy, rushed, stressful, draining and conflictual; families often find themselves in ‘no win’ situations. They seem to be prioritising their family life over and above the claims of external agencies whenever they have a choice to do so.

“Sometimes little is understood about how busy evenings are; 6-8.30 are family times, not times for meetings.” (Portsmouth)

It seems that church involvement is either becoming one choice among many or simply less of a viable option. We heard in some dioceses that Mass times have been changed and the number of Masses reduced. This makes it more difficult for some families to continue to attend regularly. Families who do go to Mass regularly are making tremendous sacrifices to do so, often at great individual cost and the cost of family unity:

“My husband is rarely at home at the weekend and when he has a rare Sunday off the last thing he wants to do is go to Mass. This influences the children who also kick up a fuss about attending Mass.” (Shrewsbury)

“Very tired at weekends, need to rest not go to more places.” (Shrewsbury)

37. One point that must be mentioned is that the busyness of everyday life is not an issue confined to families. Many families noted that priests were similarly affected. The days when pastors visited homes and were much more closely tied to families’ everyday lives were missed.

“Few of us get a chance to speak to priests but accept they are busy – we are glad to have them!” (Nottingham)

“Why don't (sic) the priest get to know the problems of the family and visit. STOP AND LISTEN.” (Leeds)

## Changing Family Structures

38. Many dioceses used the technique of story-telling at their listening days as a way to convey the feedback received from families. It was extremely effective as a means of conveying quite complex details in a short space of time and of engaging participants in facing and empathising with the reality of diverse family situations. It facilitated the process of identifying ways in which parishes and individuals could provide assistance and support and was undoubtedly the most effective method of sharing the reality of family life that we encountered. So we heard this real life story about a single mother.

“Ms C is not married or in a long-term relationship. She lives in a two-bedroom flat and has three children who she struggles to bring up alone. Financial pressures and long working hours make life difficult. There is little time to spend with the children who are always fighting with each other. Getting to church on time is a weekly nightmare. Her parish priest is always too busy to speak and seems to lack any inspiration. Ms C feels that she is treated as a leper. There is no way for her to meet other Catholic families, as people at church generally do not talk and rush away at the end of Mass. The church seems to have no understanding of the problems of those who are single parents, divorced or separated, or those who do not have straightforward marriages. Her hopes for her family are that one day they will have a bedroom each, they will have a circle of friends, and they will have a living wage.” (Clifton)

39. We heard other stories about divorce and remarriage. In these instances parents often expressed relief that their divorced children had regained the support of a committed partner and that their grandchildren once again benefited from two adult carers. Children sometimes gave thanks that they were a family again now mummy or daddy had remarried. These kinds of experiences were reflected across virtually every diocese we visited.

“Our recent findings indicate that families today are very diverse and family life is often very complex. ‘Family’ does not automatically imply marriage. Partnerships, regrouping of divorced people with children from two families, single parents, teenage girls with babies are all part of what we see as family today.” (Shrewsbury)

40. There was certainly a great deal of sadness attached to these stories. No one underestimated the amount of pain, hurt and continuing difficulties arising from marriage breakdown. But many participants in diocesan conversations were personally familiar with these situations, sometimes directly so. They were not so much shocked or appalled by the reality of family breakdown but concerned, compassionate and eager that the church should be a place of refuge and comfort for those affected. The response of young people who were experiencing step or blending family life suggests a further need for greater awareness of and support for the bereavement issues, conflict resolution and communication needs that arise.

“What was also clear is the child's longing to do things together as a family at weekends; parties and holidays providing much happiness. However with separated parents or fathers working away or long hours, this is often not possible.” (Shrewsbury)

“It's hard to get along with my stepmother. I try to ignore her bad comments and accept the good ones.” (Cardiff)

“We don't get on because my dad has got married again after my mother died.” (Cardiff)

41. It was significant that the conversation days created an atmosphere of healing for those who had arrived feeling like second-class citizens. On the other hand we heard of a preparatory meeting in one diocese when someone who was separated had been reduced to tears by an encounter with an over-zealous couple involved in supporting marriage. Fortunately this was rare. Overall we heard participants empathise with those in non-traditional families and express a high level of pragmatism about changing family structures.

“The questions for us here might be how far do we and should we, as church, come to terms with contemporary emerging patterns in relationships? Are they all bad? Can we see God in any of the changes? Can we see the difference between what is essential to family life and what is just the way we used to do it? How as church do we give due attention to the things, comfortable and not so comfortable, that people are saying matter to them?” (Liverpool)

42. This was not by any means to say that anyone devalued or dismissed marriage and the ideals of Catholic family life at all. On the contrary participants were keen to maintain traditional teaching whilst finding ways to ameliorate the tendency to condemn those whose lives did not conform. The cohabitation of their offspring was often a source of great sadness, but in families' attitudes we were reminded over and again of their ability to be generous, to endure and to tolerate. Though they might disagree with the behaviour of their loved ones, this did not mean that they excluded or closed the door on them.

“Both family and church are sources of the greatest joys and blessings when everything goes right but also sources of great sorrow and pain when it doesn't. In all the dilemmas that face both families and the church, perhaps the church can learn something from families, who keep talking and listening, who keep their doors open even when they don't condone certain behaviour. How can the church become such an extended family, there for everyone? How can the Church become a community of love that fosters all family life?” (Wrexham)

“Historically the church has been an advocate of strong family life. So perhaps first and foremost, what we as a Catholic community need to do is affirm that we believe in the value of family life, in its many forms. We must continue to believe that families, even though they come in different shapes and sizes, deserve to be celebrated and supported. Although we hold the ideal of Christian marriage as the preferred setting for family life, this must not stop us in affirming parents, wherever and however they accept responsibility for the upbringing of their children.” (Shrewsbury)

43. Throughout the conversations we heard that when families' religious beliefs conflict with the behaviour of their loved ones, they are usually strong enough to accept these differences at one level or another. They find ways to hold on to and model their beliefs and values whilst not rejecting their loved ones on the grounds of their life choices. This

enables them to continue loving their children or grandchildren and to maintain a dialogue with them. They usually do not want to distance their family members. Typical coping mechanisms described include: “Being non-judgemental.” “Praying for my grown children and grandchildren.” “Just challenging them and praying for them.” “It helps to laugh about things.” “Looking for the good in them.” Families seem to be strongly rooted in love for one another and this love suffers everyone to stay together through all the vicissitudes of life. This does not mean however that the pain of sadness or disappointment goes away.

44. In one sense the *Listening 2004* brochure tested families’ definition of the term ‘family’ just as it did their understanding of the term ‘church’. Some – including children - used family very broadly to describe all those who provided them with a range of support, not necessarily just those related by blood or marriage. Pets were often included as well as neighbours and close family friends.

“For some of course lasting happy marriage is an unlikely possibility, and some singled out friendship and informal partnerships as serving many of the same purposes as family.” (Liverpool)

“I am a divorced, middle aged woman, living alone, so there is little family life. I have learned that friends can be my family”. (Plymouth)

A child in Westminster defined the essence of family thus:

“Families are the best thing on earth. It doesn’t matter if you break up, it doesn’t matter if you are a different skin colour and it doesn’t matter how people are, it just matters that you love them.”

45. Reliance on friends and neighbours was often a case of necessity for those whose extended family often lived a long distance away. One woman who wrote in described the care and kindness she had experienced after the death of her father from others in her parish, who then became family for her in a new and special way. Very often fellow parishioners or a small church group were described as family, especially by those who were lonely, bereaved or in some other need.

46. Another point made about changing family structures was the sense that structure can sometimes become a distraction when evaluating the health or otherwise of family life. In Southwark a small group conversation about supporting single parents began by noting the tendency to make assumptions based on family structures:

“Remember that some lone parents manage very well and some married parents don’t – are we falling into stereotypes?”

The same tendency was noted in Arundel and Brighton, though from the opposite perspective:

“There’s a danger of presuming that a family that are together are therefore OK and don’t need help.”

## **Mobility and Communications**

47. We have already reported that parishioners and friends often replace the extended family in supplying support and companionship when distance separates families. What

we haven't yet mentioned is the significance to families of living at a distance from one another and the amount of loneliness that this can cause.

"The increased mobility of families means that the extended family structure has changed. These days, families are nationwide rather than community based meaning that grandparents are less able to help look after their grandchildren." (Shrewsbury)

"We heard from young families whose parents are too far away to support and encourage, adult children too far from parents in poor or failing health and from many elderly people whose children and grandchildren live at a distance and from those who missed the extended family." (Wrexham)

48. This was one reason why families really appreciated better transport and communications technology. It made keeping in touch much easier. A significant amount of respondents noted motorways, videos, the internet, emails and mobile phones as important blessings of modern life.

"I'm so grateful for modern communications; that way we can keep in touch with family on other continents." (Leeds)

Yet the feedback occasionally reflected the particular problems faced by those living family life on a global plane:

"I find that trying to support and care for aging relatives who are alone back in India is a problem." (Southwark)

49. In the Forces, separation was also a difficulty for families but not always as a result of Service issues.

"A large proportion felt that the biggest problem faced was separation from immediate and wider family. This was not specifically Service focused as many spoke of the needs of children and grandchildren who had to move away from home to seek employment. Norman Tebbit's 'get on your bike' was used on occasions to describe views of the developing society where families needed to split for economic reasons. People believed that they coped with these through modern day communications but felt that these were not as fulfilling as being in close proximity to their nearest and dearest."

50. A good proportion of respondents were elderly and loneliness was a significant feature even when families lived close by. The busyness experienced by parents working and bringing up children sadly seems to have had a negative impact on the older generation.

"I have a big family - 6 children & 15 grandchildren. I'm a widow. It's lonely very often. Family are busy. I have God in my life. Otherwise I couldn't cope." (East Anglia)

"The most moving for me was a blank leaflet on which someone, during Mass, had written: 'I feel so lonely.'" (Leeds)

51. Somewhat ironically the availability of better and varied methods of communication within the home seems also to create a potential for less one-to-one communication between members of a family.

“Difficulties in family life often stem from lack of communication. This is often caused and aggravated by the presence of other pursuits within the home - TV, Computer Games, mobile phones.” (Shrewsbury)

52. Anxieties were expressed about the busyness of family life affecting the quality of family communication. One diocese questioned whether ‘busyness’ was becoming part of an avoidance of closeness on the part of some individuals. Lack of good communication habits and role models within the family might create problems in the future.

“In the past families were supported by commonly held values, a greater clarity of roles, firmer structures. Today so much is down to the individual and happiness often depends on how successfully we manage our relationships. Some youngsters are getting little opportunity to learn the vast number of skills which are needed in today’s world just to be a person, to be a couple, to create and become a family. The explosion of counselling services, listening services and helplines bears witness to the need for support and often from services where we are not known.” (Liverpool)

53. One final point about family mobility arises from the economic pressures on young adults who often find it much harder now to establish their own homes. Remaining in the parental home for much longer than in the more recent past, the challenges of what we might describe as immobility can be just as great as those caused by mobility. There were also examples of older children returning to the parental home after family breakdown.

“Young people need support for far longer than they used to.” (Arundel & Brighton)

“It is difficult not to be taking sides in any arguments but to try to be peaceful.” (Family ‘living in’ with writer) (Plymouth)

“When my son’s relationship failed he returned home to live.” (Arundel & Brighton)

“There was some evidence of problems with older children in their twenties, and two cases in their thirties, still living at home for economic reasons.” (Forces)

## **Hurting Families**

54. As we have mentioned there was a great deal of honest and candid sharing in the replies that families sent in on the *Listening 2004* brochure. The project provided an impetus for people to express their painful experiences and needs to the community. Anonymity seems to have enabled a good amount of church-associated pain to come to light. One collator prefaced a report on local feedback with the following observation:

“There are also indications that certain strongly felt opinions are the result of personal experiences, some painful where the local church/priest is perceived to have failed particular individuals.” (Birmingham)

55. *Listening 2004* provided an opportunity to direct people to sources of help within the church. As part of the project a list of helplines, useful numbers and agency contact information was drawn up, distributed via diocesan coordinators and made available on



the project website. Many dioceses added local agencies details and contact numbers to this and distributed it to parishes.

56. A number of telephone calls and letters to the Project Officer during the year requested help with victim support, marriage counselling, and mental health and annulment procedures as a direct result of the distribution of the *Listening 2004* brochures. Undoubtedly diocesan coordinators experienced similar direct demands for assistance. This suggests a continuing need for a national point of contact for similar future requests. There also appears to be a need for services and assistance that are evidently in tune with Catholic spiritual beliefs and religious practices.

57. It helped the *Listening 2004* process that the Catholic Church already possesses networks of assistance through a wide variety of Catholic caring agencies and organisations. The Catholic Church has a long record of caring for hurting and vulnerable families, of which it can be proud. Nevertheless a number of issues were raised which families believed still require more attention from the church.

“Many families carry what have been called the hidden illnesses, difficult personalities, various forms of mental ill health, behavioural problems, modern manifestations of psychological malaise such as anorexia, and increasingly common - anxiety and low self-esteem. As well as placing great strain on families these are often also a source of shame and give rise to intensely painful feelings of failure and inadequacy. Because of this, many families soldier on alone with intolerable internal pressures, often unknown even to close friends and relatives, because the problems are too painful and too private to bear disclosure.”  
(Liverpool)

58. Problems with alcohol and drugs were noted in one diocese as “becoming a way of life for many” (Shrewsbury). In Clifton a story was shared about life with an alcoholic:

“Mrs B has suffered from loneliness for a long time. Only one or two people in the parish know that her husband suffers from alcoholism. He is also ardently anti-Catholic in his views and refuses to attend events such as the children’s First Holy Communions. Both she and the children are not able to invite people home as they do not want others to know. The parish priest and parish sister have been tremendously supportive. The children’s liturgy is a life-saver as are parish events where children are welcome. She hopes that her children will grow up healthy and happy, will try to follow Jesus, and will care for others and the world.”

59. In the Forces, the issue of drugs seemed to worry parents:

“A fear of a developing drug culture was a great fear by many and this was allied to their belief that this was due to the failure of the Church leaders to get the message of true Christian life across to the country.”

In Arundel & Brighton we heard that “drugs, especially cannabis, are too readily available.”

60. In Portsmouth a presentation by the mother of a severely depressed teenager suggested that mental health is still an issue that remains taboo, although some progress has been made.

“We were pleased that the church seems prepared to take on issues such as mental health and that we’ve had this opportunity to talk about difficult issues. We didn’t think this would have happened 12 years ago.” (Portsmouth)

61. The needs of carers in these and other situations merited significant attention in some dioceses, particularly as more and more families often find themselves caring simultaneously for both young children and ageing parents.

“We have my father who is terminally ill and my son who is a drug addict. We try to laugh and take each day as it comes.” (Cardiff)

However the response of many, especially in Cardiff who considered the question at length, was that the church should not try to reinvent the wheel where sufficient services already existed in the wider community. The church would be more useful as a ‘sign-post’ to these services and as a source of spiritual or social support for those affected.

62. Gay issues also featured. In Clifton participants listened to the hurt experienced by a family as a result of prevailing attitudes towards homosexuality.

“Mr D discovered some years ago that his son was gay. He tried to talk to a fellow parishioner about his concern, but quickly realised from the extremely hostile, disparaging remarks made that this was not a good idea. The parish priest reacted in a similarly prejudiced way. Mr D’s wife chose to ignore the situation. Mr D feels angry, frustrated and totally rejected by the church. He now knows to follow his wife’s lead and keep quiet. There seems nowhere to turn. In his mind there is little hope for the future.”

We report further on issues connected with homosexuality in Chapter 3.

63. On the other hand, we did hear that society is more tolerant of differences these days and that this is valued by families.

“We live in a culture more open to ethnic minorities, more open to change and opportunity; less rejecting of others achievements; less prepared to be brow-beaten or bullied.” (Nottingham)

“We have freedom of thought and speech.” (Wrexham)

## **Listening to Young People**

64. A number of dioceses made extra efforts to involve young people in *Listening 2004* primarily through their schools. This was not always possible because of the constraints of school timetables. However, some dioceses successfully invited young people to participate both in their preparation for their conversation day and in the day itself. In Clifton the Diocesan advisor to secondary schools produced a special version of the brochure using the Simpson family as a starting point for conversations with sixth formers. In Cardiff and Leeds competitions for different age groups were organised on the theme of family; a winning entry was performed live by the rock band ‘Alpha Males’ in Cardiff. In Brentwood and Westminster children’s prayer competitions were organised.

In Shrewsbury and Middlesbrough too we heard substantial contributions from young people. These provided us with an invaluable insight into their experiences of family life, of today's world and of the church.

“They have stated that they face many difficulties and hold many fears.

Illness/death of parents/grandparents is a constant source of worry for many and arguments with parents and siblings cause much stress and anxiety. On a positive note the overwhelming feeling of children was that family is very important.

Their answers indicated that being part of a family is the best present you can have, making you feel wanted and special. The unconditional love provided by a family unit was a source of strength through difficult times.” (Shrewsbury)

65. In Clifton youth feedback indicated similar findings. Students described happy families as those that listen, share, make time for each other, have money, and don't shout or argue. Unhappy families however tended to shout, argue, worry about money, and not talk to each other. Sources of conflict at home were usually step parents, mum/dad's boyfriends/girlfriends, 'too many stupid rules', people not caring, and people not listening. Interestingly more young people said they were influenced by family and friends than by the media, which somewhat challenges parents' own perceptions. The Simpsons were seen to be good family role models because they ate together and worked out their problems.

66. In Cardiff we heard more about the deep preoccupation of young people with death and dying.

“It's hard to cope when someone dies but together we can help each other.”

“My cousin is ill and they cry about it. We talk about it.”

But there were positives too. Highpoints mentioned were:

“Going out together and forgetting what has happened at home.”

“Being able to love each other.”

“We pull together through the hard times.”

## **What Can We Learn From This?**

67. Many families reported that the world presents little or no problem and this needs to be acknowledged:

“We know that our experience of family life is not necessarily typical – we have a stable home, are married, we own our own home and are fairly comfortable. For us, our family life is at the centre of our individual and collective existence – we cannot see that this would be changed whether we were living now or at another time. There are many distractions and harmful influences in today's society.

However, there are also many positive aspects of living during this time and we accept the challenge of passing on our own values to our children.” (Nottingham)

There was also much in the world that families really appreciated such as education, health care, social services and supports, neighbours, friends, labour saving devices, more choices and opportunities. It seems therefore that when we, as a church, talk about the effects of the modern world on family life, we must adopt a balanced approach that

reflects and acknowledges the positives as well as the negatives. There is much that is good in the world that deserves greater recognition and celebration.

68. But for those who are under pressure - and even for those relatively well off - the picture is not always straightforward. The complexity of the world in which we live is hard to describe adequately in black or white terms. There are a lot of grey areas which sometimes, even simultaneously, both help and hurt family life, which remains extremely painful for some. Similarly what hurts or helps some families may not hurt or help others or even in the same way. For example, multiplicity of choice can be experienced as something that both liberates families and challenges them.

69. A large part of family energy, especially when feeling vulnerable or unworthy, seems to go into 'keeping up appearances'. We learned at one of the first conversation days that the anonymity provided by the brochure had allowed voices to be heard that rarely speak:

"I have answered this from the heart, but few people would recognise this as me – we all present ourselves differently to the world." (Clifton)

Is it possible that some Catholic families perceive their role in the church to be that of presenting the positive face of traditional Catholic family life, no matter what their difficulties are? More worryingly, do they think they are only acceptable to the Catholic community if they look and behave in certain ways?

70. The loneliness expressed by so many participants was cause for concern:

"The knowledge that we have many lonely people (single people, one parent families and some couples where one or both might be suffering from poor health) scattered throughout the diocese, many of them finding it difficult to cope, must warrant attention. How do we reach out to them? We can't expect the parish priest to manage this on his own." (Plymouth)

A worrying number of participants highlighted the cliquey nature of parish life which compounds feelings of isolation.

"My church is wonderful although there seems to be a 'clique' of 'do-gooders' as in most communities into which you have to be 'invited'". (Liverpool)

"I go to church, people are clicky. No one speaks if they don't know you. I keep focussed on God." (East Anglia)

"It was clear from the responses, that one person's warm and caring parish is another's clique, and that there are people coming to our churches faithfully every week who don't feel accepted by the parish community and remain on the margins. People want to find friendship and care in the parish." (Wrexham)

71. When we looked at the commonalities of need and desire in all that we heard what did we see?

- A cry for belonging, acceptance and appreciation;
- Some practical skills and the reinforcement of gospel values to make life-choices and complex decision making a little easier;
- Opportunities for rest, recuperation and for building supportive relationships with other families;

- Understanding and encouragement from those in positions of authority within the church.

72. One coordinator suggested that “individuals and their differences are a grace” and that the perceived “decline in family values is actually a lack of valuing of the family within the community.” (Forces) We think this statement might be usefully explored further. How might families experience being valued, in very practical terms, by both society and the Church? How might society and the Church more explicitly articulate their appreciation for family life in ways that will penetrate the very stressful lives of families?

73. When participants in diocesan conversations talked about the strains and stresses of balancing work and family life they recognised that families need more help and that the church could do a lot to provide this, particularly by re-examining both parish practices and parish expectations of families.

“We may need to do things differently to help families have time together.”  
(Clifton)

“People cry out for formation in the faith but when it is provided their diaries are full. Is catechesis being done in the right places?” (Westminster)

74. The response of young people who were experiencing step or blending family life, suggests a need for greater awareness of and support for the bereavement issues, conflict resolution and communication needs that arise. In some dioceses Rainbows peer support groups have been established within schools and parishes to help children come to terms with their loss.

75. Participants in the conversations identified similar and other ways forward:

- “There is a real need to build community, led by the parish priest, in order to establish some sort of pastoral support. How do we spread news of certain organizations? How do we practically go about linking up families in a parish? Maybe we have to stay at church longer than just for Mass.” (Clifton)
- “Those who felt strongly the need for more spiritual support also felt that they were being more and more sidelined as Christians and that the Christian message needed to be better explained by church leaders.” (Forces)
- “We should support people without judgement. People who need support need to feel able to come to the church for that. Perhaps our parishes need to spend more time prioritising marriage and family life as the basis of the church.” (Portsmouth)
- “Don’t forget the ecumenical dimension to any of this. All the churches are struggling to hold families together. Look at what solutions are being found locally and work together – we are all short of resources and volunteers”.  
(Brentwood)
- “We do need to acknowledge the ideal of family life but the reality is messy - pieces of the puzzle keep breaking away and need putting together again. Expectations are out of balance in all areas of family life. The starting point we think is that a welcoming ministry is absolutely essential. If you are going to help

people they must know they are welcome - by accepting, supporting, listening. Then we may need to offer professional help - a care directory for example. It's inevitable that the priest might be a filter or conduit for information and advice but there should be someone else centrally to refer people on to." (Leeds)

- "We need to engage with the media to give a more responsible and constructive educational message about sexuality to young and old alike." (Lancaster)
- "We should ask ourselves what is church? Is it a place where services are provided to customers or a gathering of a community? I don't want to be an object - objects don't have feelings - but to feel part of the church. I feel very marginalized and alienated even though I am very active in church. We need to create structures where people feel they belong and can share." (Southwark)
- "If there was more help forthcoming to deal with the administration of the parish with regard to the paperwork/communications etc the priest might be able to train up and oversee a small task force to search out and set up a visiting plan for the parish to ensure that people who would more than appreciate a visit are visited every one or two weeks." (Plymouth)
- "Family should be defined as a mini-community alongside faith groups, with opportunities provided for reflection on lived experience, sexuality, church teaching and the gospel. Practical skills need to be available." (Westminster)
- "We felt that there was a great need for welcoming groups in parishes. We need to build up a sense of responsible community in a parish. It can be hard to reach families on the margins - they suffer lack of confidence, rejection etc so we must make an extreme effort to help them build up their self worth. Credit Unions are one way of coping with debt. Perhaps interdenominational groups could work together if possible." (Wrexham)

## **Chapter 2. Family Life and Living the Faith**

76. In every single diocese we visited we heard a great deal about faith in the family home. There were very many positive aspects to this, particularly as we came to appreciate the significance of faith, gospel values, community and prayer in sustaining family life. However we also learned that the area of faith sometimes causes families tremendous anxiety, heartache, division, grief, anger and bewilderment. These are all challenges which can lead to growth, but can certainly threaten survival if some kind of informed strategy is not found to resolve or manage them. Certainly these issues must concern us as a church since we strongly identify our community life and health with the life and health of our families.

77. In this chapter we try to do justice to the complexity of this area of family life but with one proviso. In listening repeatedly to families' concerns about faith matters it became clear that certain words and phrases held different meanings for different people. For example, the question of passing on faith was clearly, for some, more explicitly about passing on The Faith (or the beliefs, values and practices of the Catholic Church). For others the term seemed to imply faith in God generally, that is, the sowing and/or sustaining of a growing relationship with God (usually, but not exclusively, in the context of the beliefs, values and practices of the Catholic Church) and effecting a Christian lifestyle. These differences, whilst in no way mutually exclusive, are important to bear in mind. They affected, as we shall illustrate, participants' assumptions, anxieties, expectations, needs and 'solutions'. The relationship between the two 'understandings' was not always explicit. At different times and in different situations they correlated, overlapped, intertwined or ran in totally opposite directions. These meanings can be, as in so many other areas of church life, a source of unity or a source of division.

78. Ultimately however we felt that each family expressed its own needs according to its own experiences and circumstances and that we ought not to be too distressed by diversity: we are not now nor have ever been a 'one-size-fits-all' Christian community.

### **Valuing Faith in God**

79. Families reported in every diocese that we visited that their faith was extremely important to them and that it helped them to cope with a range of difficulties at home and in the world. There were a variety of ways in which this happened.

80. Christian values were strongly identified as a source of strength for family life, even from one individual in Nottingham diocese who declared him/herself to be an atheist. The gospel values derived from the person and life of Jesus provide families with direction and a source of reference by which to discern and decide appropriate responses to a variety of situations:

“It provides a framework and sense of values in a changing and chaotic world, solidarity against the materialism of the day.” (Liverpool)

81. The unchanging nature of gospel values was often identified as providing families with stability and strength. Families often coped with stress by practising gospel values of mercy, tolerance, hospitality etc:

“Tolerance, love, respect, compromise.” (Portsmouth)

“By supporting each other and pulling together. Keeping a happy environment at home with lots of love.” (Salford)

“By admitting mistakes, loving, giving, being non-judgmental.” (Southwark)

82. Prayer was another significant coping strategy; the Sacraments were also mentioned but generally by comparatively few:

“As an old age pensioner, I say my prayers through difficult times and put my trust in God.” (Salford)

“We cope by prayer and forgiveness.” (Salford)

“Try and cope with difficulties by prayer.” (Birmingham)

83. Belief in God gives families hope and someone to turn to who is always there. At times of great joy and despair faith provides a deeper meaning for family life and a broader context in which to understand and mark great happiness and great sadness.

“I cope through belief in the Gospel as the only way that works.” (nk)

84. The community of faith within the local or adopted parish community was for many families a source of comfort and support, especially when times were difficult, but also as an extended or replacement family:

“Respondents ... considered that the Church was a source of support and consolation to families in many areas of life, not least in times of sorrow and loss.” (Birmingham - North Staffs)

“I don't feel lonely although I am on my own because the church community is always there for me.” (Nottingham)

“Gives support and strength, friendliness and friendship, forgiveness and encouragement.” (Shrewsbury)

“The friends we have at church enrich our lives, and give us spiritual support for the right choices.” (Portsmouth)

85. For some families, specific means of family support provided by the church community had been a blessing, though in relative terms these experiences were few:

“Meeting together in groups, cell groups, Teams of Our Lady etc.” (Southwark)

“SVP social action, parenting classes.” (Shrewsbury)

“Parenting groups, books and spiritual direction.” (Southwark)

“Children's Liturgy groups.” (Southwark)

“One member of the group revealed that she had experienced the Family Caring Trust programme and that this had totally changed her life at that time.... It was also remarked that Marriage Care was doing good work and often counsellors were remarkably open to the difficulties faced by all generations.”

(Middlesbrough)



86. Catholic schools were also widely appreciated for their part in the family's life of faith.

“Schools sometimes fill the vacuum left by the absence of extended family. They may also be more aware of problems in a family than the local church, so closer links here could be valuable.” (Shrewsbury)

“It was noted that good Catholic educational experience was a huge bonus both to children and to their parents.” (Middlesbrough)

87. Often priests were mentioned as the key source of church support for families:

“The priest is at the heart of human community – much is achieved if the priest is a good leader and communicator.” (Shrewsbury)

“My current parish priest is incredibly understanding of the difficult challenges that individuals cope with, welcoming people from broken marriages and encouraging them to share equally in the life of the parish.” (Portsmouth)

88. Where figures were supplied, the community aspect of parish life was more widely identified and valued as supportive of family life than either prayer or the sacraments, frequently by significant margins. In Hallam for example three times as many valued the support of ‘like-minded people’ than ‘prayer and sacraments’.

“‘Spiritual and moral support’ is the principal felt benefit for most people – before they mention sacraments and prayer. People said their “Hopes from the Church” are for acceptance, being there, belonging. It is clear that all this means that people, relationships, friendships come first, then services, then teaching etc. Especially where families lack close relatives, or relatives living close by, Church can be their principal community as parish, and school. Often this is welcoming, flexible, adaptable, real and supportive – a real source of personal and family identity. The Church as a family of families might well be a useful model.” (Liverpool)

89. Families appear to value faith in God because it plays a large part in helping them practically to cope with the stresses and strains of their daily lives and the world around them. Their faith provides them with a structure and a moral foundation for their decision-making and discernment. It provides them with a renewable source of energy in the presence of God: always there, always available and always accepting of them, no matter what. Faith in God truly strengthens families, providing a broader outlook and a range of reference in all seasons and stages of family life. Understanding this appreciation of a strong faith in God helped us to frame a context for the high levels of anxiety that families also expressed.

## **Communicating Faith in God**

90. There was little doubt that the main anxiety in the area of faith at home was connected to the communication (‘passing on’) of faith and the growing generations in families who seem to have become impervious to faith or church. We listened to these concerns in the knowledge that an earlier report commissioned by the Bishops had identified families as the most effective means of bringing people to faith in God.

“What is very apparent yet again is that it is in the context of the family that faith would seem to be most effectively communicated and nurtured. Secondary to this influence is the importance attached to a sense of belonging in the local Church.”<sup>7</sup>

The health and confidence of families in the area of communicating faith is therefore extremely important to the whole Catholic community. It has massive ramifications beyond the home, for the parish and for the wider Christian community, especially in the area of what we call evangelisation. So what did we learn?

91. Without exception, every diocesan conversation reflected the struggle and anxiety of parents and grandparents in passing on (the) faith to their children and grandchildren. This struggle was represented by questions of how to pray with their children, how to answer the moral questions they raised, how to share gospel values, how to cope with challenging behaviour, how to keep children involved in the Mass and the parish and even how to justify being practising Catholics as children began to rebel.

“When I pray with him before he goes to sleep at night should I kneel or is it alright to sit on the bed beside him?” (Leeds)

“Catholic parents want to bring their children up in the faith but it's proving very hard. Children are complaining very early that Mass is boring; an awful lot of young people see the Church as irrelevant and it's not just those who have not been taught or brought up properly. Parents also say they need much more help in the faith formation of their children: help finding suitable books, and prayer and worship resources.” (Wrexham)

“Teenagers not going to church. Children in Church – not welcomed in some parishes (not this one!).” (Birmingham)

“A difficulty? – persuading our 4 year old to go to Mass every Sunday.” (Leeds)

“One of the key concerns expressed by parents and parish groups was the struggle within families to keep their teenagers interested in the faith and in Mass.” (Brentwood)

92. The conversations that we heard on this topic rarely seemed to be informed by any great sense within families or the community as a whole of how faith is actually communicated and how it develops. This was further complicated by the variety in meaning of the term 'faith' to which we have already referred.

93. For example, if a participant equated faith with Mass attendance they were likely to be more focussed on the practices or external appearance of an inner faith life: how to teach children their prayers, how to behave in Church, getting them involved in the parish etc. They were more likely to identify needs such as clearer catechesis for adults and young people, more relevant homilies, more activities in the parish or school for the young, more Church teaching and better role models.

“The documents and teaching of the church are not very well distributed - we are not informed about them. Maybe there's a need to teach us, in a more friendly

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<sup>7</sup> Evangelisation in England & Wales: a report to the Catholic Bishops. Philip Knights & Andrea Murray. Catholic Communications Service, 2002. p121.

language so it can go into schools, homes, on basic issues i.e. why we pray...it can be hard to answer children's questions.” (Westminster)

“We should consider placing even more emphasis on the need for young, role-model chaplains (and assistant lay chaplains) in secondary schools.”  
(Birmingham–North Staffs)

In Southwark we heard that 4% of respondents wanted priests to preach homilies on why we have to go to Mass, to help parents explain that to their children. These kinds of responses suggest a desire for external solutions rather than for resources which would equip and enable families internally to meet these challenges.

94. However if participants equated faith with a growing relationship with God they were more likely to request further resources for developing parents’ own faith, a more explicit Church understanding and articulation of appreciation of family life and more emphasis on the welcoming and community aspect of parishes.

“Home needs joining up with church much more and the value of what parents are actually doing needs recognizing, especially the parents’ foundational experiences of love. That’s how we start to bring kids up in the faith - by showing them love. People often feel their ordinary life is divorced from what is happening in church on Sunday, so we need more teaching about the gospel value of what we are doing as family.” (Middlesbrough)

“If my parents were not so incredibly patient, loving and blessed by God, we children would not have had such a wonderful foundation in the Catholic Church. I really feel that Parenting Courses are necessary, because when I come to have children, please God, I want to give them a good start in Christian life such as I had.” (Plymouth)

“We need to support parents as the first educators of their children so that they can become well rounded human beings through, for example, parenting programmes, marriage preparation, parents and toddler groups, Rainbows etc.”  
(Lancaster)

95. Of course *all* these needs are important and they were not always expressed in such diverse or exclusive terms. But they do illustrate a lack of coherence that exists among families and the faithful about the matter of communicating faith. For example, participants from a wide range of perspectives requested more and better catechesis. We sensed however that the meaning of ‘more and better’ varied quite considerably according to an individual’s particular perspective, including their experience, maturity of faith and prevailing anxieties. Further conversation on this particular challenge will be extremely important.

96. As a Church we believe strongly that faith is communicated in the first place by witnessing to it, that is, by practising love, justice, mercy, peacemaking and so forth in our daily lives.<sup>8</sup> Parents are “the first teachers of their child in the ways of faith<sup>9</sup>”. Their

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<sup>8</sup> Cardinal Hume was very fond of quoting Pope Paul VI in this regard: “Modern people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”

<sup>9</sup> Rite of Infant Baptism. ICEL, 1969

role in passing on faith is *irreplaceable*<sup>10</sup>, not simply helpful, good or ‘nice if you can get them on board’. But few people we listened to spoke as if they understood this. Neither did they equate support for passing on faith with practically helping parents to be more aware of their holy work of simply *living* Christianity with their children, with all the example, explanation and activity that this entails. We noted too that if parents are themselves ambivalent in their relationship with the Church it also adds to the challenge of communicating faith.

“There are a lot of bewildered and hurt people in our midst who are trying to bring their children up in the Catholic faith but feel alienated themselves from it.”  
(Brentwood)

97. Hardest to listen to was the pain of parents and grandparents living with the bewilderment, pain and guilt of failure. This was often expressed in private conversations but was perfectly summed up by a comment made in Lancaster:

“If only the Church could be more understanding of the difficulties faced in even good Catholic homes and free us of the constant question ‘Where did we go wrong?’” (Lancaster)

98. The crunch point comes, it seems, for many Catholic parents when a decision has to be made about when to stop insisting that their children go to Mass. A corresponding crunch point, therefore, for the family of the Church must be how to help parents manage the resulting guilt, bereavement and grief.

“We have struggled with the question of whether to make our children go to church since they were 11. We have not made them go although we do. We go because we think that Church gives us time to be with our thoughts and our prayers. The service itself is boring, but that is not why I go. We hope that through our example the kids will return to the Church as they get older and they see the relevance of God in their own lives. We still see this every day in their qualities of compassion, love and care. Are they less Christian because they do not go to church? I often feel guilty about them not going, but I do not really see why.” (nk)

A member of the neo-catechumenate community explained their approach to this question:

“At the age when children are leaving the church our children are keener than ever to go because it’s a moment for them to join their own community. We don’t take our very young children to church - they are a distraction - but when they grow up and can prove they can sit still then they can go to church.” (Southwark)

99. By comparison, in many if not most dioceses we heard that the church offered little to young adults once they had been confirmed, until they were ready (and willing) to be married. This begs a huge question of where and how the Church reaches and provides for those who wait many years before marrying or who never marry for whatever reason. Nevertheless participants identified many existing opportunities that the church has to offer parents more support and resources in passing on faith.

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<sup>10</sup> Catechesi Tradendae #68

“We can use sacramental opportunities to reach parents - affirming them and praising them for what they are already doing.” (Liverpool)

“Post-sacramental support is needed for parents - the programmes that are available are a source of hope. These programmes need to be on a continual roll so there is a continual stream of support to help families.” (Middlesbrough)

100. We also heard one or two good examples of family-centred catechesis in sacramental preparation:

“In my parish we take a Baptism preparation programme in four sessions direct to parents in their homes. In this way we are able to talk to both parents at once, and also to provide a service to parents, tired from broken nights. (Church-based programmes are often attended by only one parent whilst the other baby-sits at home). This is often the only opportunity to reach the non-Catholic partner in a 'mixed marriage' and frequently that partner is most appreciative of our programme. We do make the point that there is one baptism and that the Body of Christ - the catholic church (small 'c') - refers to all Christians.” (Middlesbrough)

“When my son made his first communion last year the preparation was quite different to when his older brothers did it. This time the parish rather than the school organised it all and sent someone to visit us every other week for about ten minutes each time. Our ‘supporter’ would sit down with my son and go through the materials and in between times we had to get on with it ourselves. I was a bit cross at first – we had to tidy up and stay in on a Saturday, and it was more effort than just making sure he was dressed properly on the day. But very soon I enjoyed the visits and getting to know someone new. I felt respected for what I was doing and that they (the parish) really cared about us all. We even got to choose which Mass he could make his first communion at.” (Birmingham)

101. We are sure there must be more such examples around the dioceses and that these models are worth exploring and developing. They have potential for strengthening the bonds between parish and families, helping parents to take responsibility and also providing a point of contact in case of further need. By focussing on the home they might also fit in better with busy family lives and support the family ‘togetherness’ that seems so hard to manage.

“People are under pressure and are doing their best to stay normal - they find it hard to come to talks and sessions - they say they want these things but when they are provided their diaries are already full. Is catechesis being done in the right places? Maybe we need to take it to people not expect them to come to us.” (Westminster)

Inevitably the question of home-centred catechesis is likely to create additional demands on those with responsibility for child and vulnerable adult protection within the parish or diocese. But the wider benefits are well worth further consideration.

102. There was also a recognition that though some young people did not practice their faith this did not mean they were without faith. In the course of several diocesan conversations participants pointed out that practice of the faith did not always consist of going to Mass.

“Young people often have a very strong faith but they often express it in action rather than in church.” (Westminster)

“We should stress that being Catholic is more than going to Mass - while we wish to encourage our children to go to Mass we want them to know that being Catholic is more than that.” (Cardiff)

“Although it was recognized that some children stopped attending the sacraments as they grew older, it was believed that the grounding in Catholicism developed strong moral and spiritual principles that would never leave them.” (Forces)

“I am disappointed my children are not regular attenders but I know they love God by the lives they lead, so I pray they will return.” (Leeds)

“We have caught the modern habit of denigrating our young. No one says anything good about teenagers - they are lovely - we need to make positive efforts to love them, wait while they go off and make their mistakes and then welcome them back as adults. And stop looking at them as a problem because they are lovely.” (Southwark)

“Today’s youth are better informed than my generation and an amazing number show practical concern about today’s social justice issues.” (East Anglia)

103. In the sense that faith is a developing relationship with God, we wondered if families have a tendency to be too quick to see themselves as failures. Perhaps, in the same way, the church is too slow to take its share of the responsibility for not helping more to attract and retain the attention and interest of children and young people. We heard the following stories from families who are very active and involved in their parish life:

“Due to the extent of our involvement in various Church activities, we either find ourselves at different Masses or if at the same Mass different positions in the church. Unfortunately the time will come when the children will not want to come along with us anymore. So it is important that they appreciate going as a family to Mass now. Children are easily distracted and become bored in this adult environment. They need to be encouraged to want to know more about what is going on. We try to follow the ‘come to Mass’ books and various other biblical stories to hold their interests but it is difficult.” (Nottingham)

“We feel overburdened by expectations from Church and clergy. How do we cope – not well.” (Arundel & Brighton)

“The time factor is a difficulty: catechists who look after children's liturgies etc. feel it necessary to go to another Mass to fulfil their obligation.” (Southwark)

104. One difficulty when talking about this point of retaining the interest of the young is that to some it inevitably seemed to suggest ‘change’ or ‘entertainment’ and therefore occasionally provoked a defensive or hostile reaction. We felt that language might need to be employed sensitively in this area. Perhaps we need rather to consider how a range of diverse needs can be *accommodated* within the life and practice of the Catholic faith so that no one feels alienated or excluded, and everyone feels welcome and included.

## Lost Generations

105. In reflecting on her diocesan conversation during the days that followed it, a *Listening 2004* coordinator made the following comment:

“Although it was one of the main findings we did not actually on Saturday highlight the crisis in the Church - that we've lost two generations. Grandparents are still around but we've lost our children's and grandchildren's generations.” (Portsmouth)

106. She was not alone in this observation. We heard similar comments in many other dioceses.

“I don't think I can exaggerate the pain and the heartache, the bewilderment and anxiety expressed by parents over adult children who have lapsed despite their best efforts. Grandparents grieve to see their children cohabiting or marrying outside the Church; their grandchildren not baptised or not brought up in the faith.” (Wrexham)

107. For many families the grief experienced when children leave the church – and the fear for subsequent generations - is immense. But their reactions to this challenge often vary.

“Some said that our children were created to be free so they have the freedom to leave the Church; there is no need for the Church to change, rather we should carry on as before and proclaim the truth with clarity and confidence. Another view is that we see our children trying to live good lives, often having many fundamental values in common with us yet their image of Church is negative. We find ourselves affirming all that is good in their lives, including unconditional love for their family. We can see that they have not cut themselves off from the grace of God but from the Church.” (Wrexham)

108. The explanations by families of why their children leave the church are wide-ranging.

“My two eldest children have drifted away from the Church because it has ceased to be relevant to the lives they lead.” (Portsmouth)

“Some replies say the Church is authoritarian and using antiquated and exclusive male language and say this alienates many. Scandals of abuse and failing to act on it appropriately have damaged the Church's standing in society.” (Wrexham)

But other factors are also involved.

“What is the role of Church in our lives? More and more Church means that time on a Sunday when you have to get to this particular Mass. There are a lot of pressures on families now. As parents we have to insist on or represent the value of that time at Mass and its relevance to daily life. There's nothing you can do when times get tough and children reject the faith. We can't see any solutions except how we can support parents in preparing for and enduring these pressures. One practical way is perhaps to have mentor couples available to assist.” (East Anglia)

109. But whatever the reasons why significant numbers of younger generations are being lost to the church, the net effect on families is recurring conflict and pain, sometimes leading to a loss of sense of themselves as families in the Church. For example, one respondent replying to the question ‘What difficulties do you experience as a family in the Church’ said:

“Not applicable - I am the only one who attends church.” (Westminster)

Another typical comment was:

“Only my wife and I go to church. My family only attend weddings, funerals, special occasions etc.” (Leeds)

This pain is not one-sided. A 22-year old from Southwark said this:

“The church doesn’t help me - I have felt separated from my family because of my lack of beliefs.”

110. The need for healing and help for parents who feel a deep sense of grief and failure was very apparent, with families struggling to cope in a variety of ways:

“Having had 7 children with only 1 still at home I worry about the religion attitudes and don’t know how to do anything about it.” (Salford)

“My son and daughter (now grown up) have stopped attending church but I pray they will return.” (Middlesbrough)

“I live alone. My extended family - a son and his family do not attend church - I feel great sadness.” (Salford)

“My children are now non-believers. I feel that I have failed.” (Plymouth)

“Trying to bring our lapsed Catholic children back into the Church. We pray constantly for this.” (Salford)

111. The challenge for grandparents struggling to pass faith on to their children’s children must be nearly insurmountable.

“Our grandchildren live in a caring family but no effort is made to teach them about prayer or religious practice. ‘Why should I come to church with you if Mum and Dad do not go?’” (Leeds)

Yet many grandparents are doing their utmost to pass on faith over a generation that has lapsed, by encouraging Mass attendance and preparation for the sacraments. We think that this situation is one that requires further attention, not least because of its implications in terms of family systems.

## **Sharing Faith in God at Home**

112. There were several specific family situations mentioned in the conversations that raised questions about sharing faith at home. Inter-church families are those where both adults are practising Christians of different denominations; usually, but not always, one of them is Catholic. The home seems to be the one place in their lives where unity of faith can prevail. For this reason one of the hopes expressed by these families was for more emphasis by the wider church on the home church.

“It is God who has called us to a Christian marriage, who supports us and helps us to grow as persons in our family life, and who in and through our family relationships draws us into communion with God, Father, Son and Spirit. We



should like more stress on the sacramental nature of marriage, and in particular, more focus on the family as ‘domestic church’.” (Association of Interchurch Families)<sup>11</sup>

113. But more often the question of sharing faith at home was a question of coping with differences.

“One group not catered for (within the church) are the non-Catholic partners in a marriage - when you consider that less than 20% of practising Catholics are married to other practising Catholics the vast majority are in a marriage where the other is a ‘nothing’ or a member of another church.” (Shrewsbury)

114. The needs of mixed marriages where one partner is a non-practising member of another Christian church or a non-believer are similar but different to inter-church families. Bringing up children as a lone faith-parent is often extremely challenging. We heard some evidence, albeit small, of difficulty in families where the non-Catholic partner had little sympathy for the Catholic partner’s faith.

“Bringing up children as Catholics within a mixed faith marriage, where the non-Catholic parent was objecting, was causing stress within the family life for some of our parishioners.” (Forces)

In other dioceses we heard that practising the faith regularly was sometimes experienced as extremely challenging when only one parent was Catholic. Not only was it a case of getting to church when family time was so limited but being in church with sole charge of small children was often very hard.

“With young children Mass is very difficult especially if husband does not go to church.” (Portsmouth)

“It’s the saddest thing to see a mother take a child away from Mass because they are noisy, and (to think) that the community would let them go.” (Middlesbrough)

115. By and large however non-Catholic partners seemed to be supportive, but inevitably a question is begged as to how the parish and diocesan community can support such families. We also observed some of the difficulties that arise when children not only reject faith practices but are hostile towards them.

“I feel unable to talk about religion or church matters. My children ridicule my prayer life.” (Salford)

## **Family Spirituality**

116. Only a few dioceses explicitly addressed the question of family spirituality in their conversations. In Southwark for example a group considered how the church could support and promote family spirituality. Generally speaking however when conversations turned to the question of faith or spirituality in the family, participants tended to focus largely on the topic of prayer and the challenge of keeping families and their children active in church life. Yet family spirituality lies at the heart of Christian family life as this description illustrates:

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<sup>11</sup> Certain family organisations requested an opportunity to make a group response to *Listening 2004* to assist the voices of their members to be heard.

“Above all else, spirituality is about our relationship with God. The word we use to modify “spirituality” tells us the principal way we experience that relationship. A monastic spirituality is one that finds God in the silences, the prayer rituals, the work and discipline of the monastery. An ascetic spirituality relies heavily on denial, while a “spirituality of the market place” seeks God in ministry. A family spirituality experiences God in and through the ordinary relationships and events of family life. This way of life becomes the principal means for knowing God, the primary source of grace and holiness for those called to this particular religious vocation. The simple tasks of bathing, feeding, storytelling, playing with children, all become sacramental when we understand sacraments as outward signs of our relationship with God and that relationship as incarnated in family. The more difficult tasks of letting go, welcoming the people our children choose into the circle we have created, caring for the aged with the pain it brings, all become passion and resurrection, when we recognize them as ways of laying down our lives for the other.”<sup>12</sup>

117. Occasionally we heard mention of the Church’s traditional description of the family as ‘domestic church’, usually by a priest or religious but sometimes by a member of a marriage and family organisation such as Marriage Encounter or Teams of Our Lady or the Association of Interchurch Families. When it was discussed, conversation about ‘domestic church’ was usually confined to the question of prayer and other religious practices within the home. Rarely were the teaching, fellowship or service aspects of the home church mentioned, or the many ways in which God is present in family life. This suggests that the overriding perception of the religious role of the family is primarily that of supporting the life and the work of the church. An alternative perspective might identify the role of the church as primarily that of supporting the life and work of families and others.

118. Through this lack of expressed awareness, we heard a far-reaching need for greater emphasis on family holiness and family spirituality by the pastors of the church. It has been suggested to us that one reason why we heard little about family spirituality throughout *Listening 2004* is because this is a topic which has not yet been fully or widely explored by deacons and priests. Perhaps there is a need for a comprehensive programme of continuing ministerial formation to accompany lay adult formation in the area of marital and family spirituality? We see great opportunities for the church as it begins to uncover, appreciate and celebrate the hidden riches of married and family experience. For example, when one participant was invited to explain his remark that family life was holy, he said:

“It’s because families are creative, full of joy, concern and love for one another, safe as they can be and strong on respect.” (Southwark)

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<sup>12</sup> Chesto, Kathleen O’Connell. Being Home When God Comes. National Catholic Reporter. 15.11.02

## **Family Faith at Home – Family Faith in the Parish**

119. Often the challenges posed by faith issues within the home were alleviated or compounded by the attitude of the parish ‘family’. If families perceived that their parish community knew their difficulties and understood them, then that made a huge difference in their lives. If they felt that the parish didn’t know them or misunderstood them, then cracks developed in the relationship between the home and the parish. We heard from many families who went to church every Sunday but no-one ever asked their name or who they were.

“There is little community spirit; it is difficult to get to know others; At Your Word Lord helps.” (Westminster)

120. Attitudes of unconditional welcome, awareness, sensitivity and acceptance were repeatedly mentioned by families as being extremely important to them. We have already mentioned (paragraph 88) that relationships with the parish were experienced as more helpful than the sacraments for most families who identified the church as a support. This is a crucially important point for the wider church to keep in mind. It does not mean that less emphasis need to be placed on the sacraments but rather that proportionally more attention must be paid to interpersonal relationships and the deepening of community life within the church.

121. Inevitably the role of the pastor was often mentioned as hugely important to individuals, their situations and to the vibrancy of the parish community.

“Are we a family in the church? Does ‘father’ ever listen?” (Portsmouth)

“The ministry of priests was especially valued to the extent that many responses expressed great expectations of their priests, frustration when clergy were unable to respond and gratitude for their presence.” (Salford)

But it was not only priests who were identified as having the capacity for a negative or positive impact.

“Some time ago, I suffered something of a crisis in my faith. There is an old guard within the church that complain not enough young people help the church. Over a period of 2 years I became involved with different aspects of the church with the intention of helping. I suffered a dreadful whispering campaign of criticism by the old guard - who did I think I was? I felt so completely surrounded by unchristian attitudes that even attending Mass made me so sad I had to leave. I did not attend the church for nearly 2 years. In that time no one, not even friends I thought I had - not even the priest - asked how I was or what the problem was. After trying many other churches, including the Church of England and the Methodist Church, my children wanted me to return to our Church, which we did. I still feel that the old guard look down their noses at me. While I feel that the Catholic Church is where I belong I feel that it is a very unforgiving Church. I attend Mass each Sunday and yet we all don’t know each other - it is certainly not as friendly or welcoming as the Methodist Church I have found.” (Salford)

“It seemed to me that we need to emphasise more that the Church is a family. Perhaps, in the process of ascertaining the needs of family, define again what being part of the Church family is for all of us. We all need to feel we have a voice and a place in God’s house, where we are wanted. I’m blessed to have a supportive network of family, friends, neighbours and Parish, who do love & care for me both spiritually & practically. As a former teacher, I’m aware that both in school and society, issues of parenting, morals etc. keep arising. Many people now appear aware of their rights, but less so of their responsibilities. This may well apply in the Church too. People’s expectations are high, but many seem less aware that we have to invest to create community and that includes the Church.” (Southwark)

122. Clearly the pastor *on his own* cannot and should not be responsible for supporting parish family life. The onus rests with the whole community.

“I’d like it (the parish community) to be the place where we went to join with other families in learning more about parenting, communication, living through different seasons and experiences of marriage, coping with the problems of creating a family. I’d like it to be the place that gives families really inspiring practical input on being ‘holy’ families and individuals. Real whole person, God centred (holy) development. I’d like peer support and expert input. At the moment the Church does not do this.” (Plymouth)

123. There were also a good number of responses to suggest that some families have little or no concept, experience or expectations of family support from the parish.

“Until your questionnaire I didn’t expect more from the church. It’s difficult to explain but the church is not yet a community for me. I am partly responsible for this feeling. But maybe something can be done to make the feeling of community stronger, to make it a community I would turn to ask for help if needed. My feeling is that the church is a place of worship and the morning coffee is something to do to appear to be a good Christian but no more. The church community is a place where we share our faith but not our life.” (East Anglia)

## **Listening to Young People**

124. In the light of all that we heard about family life and living the faith it was very helpful to have the perspective of the younger generation who participated in *Listening 2004*. In Middlesbrough two young adults addressed the diocesan gathering. These young people were university age and very involved in parish life; one of them was a catechist working with confirmation groups. They expressed a sense of frustration that the church sometimes tried too hard to engage young people and to be ‘cool’. They preferred that the church be a place of teaching and learning, where the difficult moral questions they faced could be answered. There was too much segregation of young people from the rest of the congregation and too much of a gap between confirmation and adulthood.

125. But the response of teenagers in Shrewsbury diocese seemed to echo the experiences of their parents. A large number said they didn't go to church, that it was boring and they didn't know why they had to go to Mass in order to believe in God:

“It's a waste of time; I could be doing more useful things.”

Many were unable to say how the church helped them in their family life, though there were exceptions.

“We are reassured to know that church and God are always a few minutes away.”

“The church gave my Gran a blessing when she was ill.”

“It's welcoming especially when the priest shakes your hand.”

Very many hoped that the parish community could make a real difference to helping the poor. Some young people who responded and others that we met seemed to ask for greater involvement in the life of the church. They did want the church to offer more social activities and they saw this as something that would benefit everyone, not just the young.

### **What Can We Learn From This?**

126. Firstly we sensed the diversity of families' experiences of the role that faith plays in their lives. We think that this diversity is significant. On one hand, faith, where it is gospel centred and very closely related to the life and work of Jesus, sustains families hugely and enables them to survive and grow through the many challenges in their lives. On the other hand, faith can also become a huge problem for families whose unity is challenged by their disparate attitudes, relationships and experiences with the church.

127. The community of believers can be a vital resource for families but it too has the capacity to create havoc, confusion and deep hurt. At times there almost seemed to be two realities at play: the life of faith as lived out in the practice of gospel values within the home and the life of the Church with all its additional implications. The relationship between the two is sometimes conflictual and we identified one possible reason why this may be so.

128. Earlier in this chapter we mentioned the topic of family spirituality, noting little evidence that the term was widely known or understood. Families expressed only rarely the spiritual significance of their family lives although they fully expressed how important family life is to them. We have thought about this a great deal over the last year. Perhaps we heard so little about the holiness of family life because families thought this was of little interest to the Church. Perhaps families do at one level appreciate and experience their lives as holy but simply have little language in which to express this or encouragement to do so. We simply do not know, but we need to find out.

129. We see a need too for greater reflection on the processes of passing on the faith in order to more fruitfully resource parents, grandparents and other family members in communicating God specifically to the younger generation. This necessarily will require greater collaboration between home/parish and parish/home, whilst not overlooking the role of the school in supporting faith development. A more joined up approach seems to be required, with greater attention and respect being paid to the home church.

130. The Church already possesses a rich vein of teaching on communicating faith<sup>13</sup> which is supported by the findings of academics and practitioners researching the question from other faith perspectives. Of particular interest are the conclusions of a cumulative study published in 2000<sup>14</sup> which identified eight key elements of effective faith transmission within families. The bracketed references locate the research finding within the documents of the Church:

- parental harmony ('conjugal communion'<sup>15</sup>),
- effective communication ('encounter and dialogue'<sup>16</sup>),
- wise parental control ('authority as... ministry'<sup>17</sup>),
- parental affection ('parental love as animating principle'<sup>18</sup>),
- Gospel-oriented parents ('Parents ... communicate the Gospel'<sup>19</sup>),
- communicating moral values ('the family is the first school of those social virtues which every society needs'<sup>20</sup>),
- being involved in serving others ('the spouses together as a couple, the parents and children as a family, must live their service to the Church and to the world'<sup>21</sup>)
- and sharing faith at home ('interwoven with love, simplicity, practicality and daily witness'<sup>22</sup>).

We think these eight areas offer an excellent starting point for considering how best to resource parents in passing on faith in God within a wider context of nurturing marriage, offering relationship skills, exploring family spirituality and deepening understanding of the richness of the family as domestic church.

131. Participants also made a number of suggestions for action:

- "Every parish should have a family liaison contact and it would help if a family liaison pack was created providing acknowledgement of the importance of families, personal contact details, information on Catholic support groups in the parish and nationally." (Southwark)
- "It's what we can do as individuals in our own parishes that will change things – through praying, listening, sharing, by offering acceptance and forgiveness." (Brentwood)
- "We need to create a culture of inclusion and welcome. We think that priests can do a lot to recognise the diverse nature of the congregation when preaching and preparing notices. The young people in our group wanted to be more involved but their voice was often not heard. Fun activities should be part of parish life." (Cardiff)

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<sup>13</sup> See especially *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), *Catechesi Tradendae* (1979) and the General Directory for Catechesis.

<sup>14</sup> Strommel, M. and Hardel, R. *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry*. Saint Mary's Press, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> *Familiaris Consortio* #21

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* #43

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid* #21

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid* #36

<sup>19</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi* #71

<sup>20</sup> *Familiaris Consortio* #36

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid* #50

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid* #53

- “We need courses and so forth in a form that every adult in the pew can understand. The Sunday bulletins are a good example with their systematic way of going through faith in bite-size chunks.” (East Anglia)
- “We should develop links to areas of interest to young people e.g. sports centres, music shops, shopping malls and offer them space and opportunities to discuss the issues that are important to them. We also need to keep parents engaged with church and develop a programme to help people establish and sustain relationships.” (Hallam)
- “We need more forums like this (i.e. Diocesan family listening day) - listen to those who know what life is like! Young people, married couples, divorcees etc.” (Lancaster)
- “There seems to be a need for greater availability of counselling: an active listening ear or Christian counselling by someone who understands the teachings of the church, prayer for young people, parenting courses for parents and for older children. Parents need more help from one another and groups like Teams of Our Lady.” (Leeds)
- “I need to be able to talk to someone I trust (not judgemental) in times of hardship/difficulty.” (Birmingham)
- “I seem to have spent most of my life listening to bereavement in the church, for example, how wonderful it used to be. Was there ever a golden age? Surely every age has its problems. There is something very worthwhile about continually celebrating what is good.... that’s the way we can support people.” (Liverpool)





## Chapter 3. Our Beliefs and Pastoral Practices

132. Difficulties arising both from misunderstanding or lack of acceptance of the teaching and pastoral practices of the Church became apparent from the very first of the diocesan conversations. At first we were aware mostly of the polarity of opinion between those who felt strongly that only a clear reaffirmation of traditional teaching could solve the challenges of family life and those who felt equally strongly that a more sensitive approach to many of the moral issues, including primacy of conscience, was vital. As the conversation days progressed we became more and more aware that it was often perceptions of the Church's teaching which were at issue, unjustly adding to the burdens being carried by already hurting individuals. These misconceptions were particularly damaging in the area of divorce and sexuality. It was very clear throughout that all the difficulties, of whatever kind, that families face can be helped or healed by the sensitivity of pastoral practices and by the availability of a supportive parish community. Conversely the same difficulties can also be exacerbated if pastoral practices are insensitive or if there is a lack of appropriate support. The picture we built up of family life in the church was summed up thus by one coordinator:

“When it works, Church is massively successful and important to people. When it doesn't it is massively wounding!” (Liverpool)

133. In this chapter we look at some of the main difficulties raised in the course of the diocesan conversations. All these difficulties must be considered in the light of the importance of both faith in God and positive church experiences for family life. If dioceses and parishes really desire to be supportive of their families then these obstacles to their relationship with them need to be addressed. When the church works well, it really can, and often does, nourish and strengthen family life.

### Are We Engaging with Real or Ideal Families?

134. One of the biggest challenges identified in all the diocesan conversations was that of sharing the vision and understanding of Catholic Christian family life in all its richness without diminishing in any way the importance to God, and to the community, of those whose family lives simply don't seem to meet the ideal. This challenge was expressed over and over again in many ways:

“From my perspective ‘the church’ holds in front of us an ideal – the Holy Family, the saints etc. We stand for marriage, family life, the sanctity of life etc. yet many people cannot live up to that ideal, often for reasons over which they have no control. Should a woman stay in a relationship where she is beaten up? What can we say to keep teenagers in the church? What if one's sexuality is problematic for the church? I could go on. Family life has always been difficult. It isn't a modern feature. Children and women worked down the mines and in factories, young girls became prostitutes in Victorian London, slavery parted families etc. Yet ‘the church’ needs to be a voice in modern times. A voice that reaches out and is inclusive. Ideals are ideals and all of us fall short. If we are to

reach out to all, we must dare to hold out our hands. We must support the divorced and separated, yet do all areas have such organisations? We should work with the homeless and marginalized in practical ways – so that people see Christ’s message. We must respond to people who are gay or lesbian. They should not feel marginalized. We should work to provide counselling where it is needed. We should be a prayerful community but we must also act. I rejoice when I see people joining the church but far, far more have left. I have Catholic friends who have left the church and they have reasons for leaving. They became frustrated with what they saw as a lack of showing God’s love in the world.” (Nottingham)

“We should be as forgiving in the broader Church as we are at home with our own families - accepting our children for who they are. On the other hand when a family member is doing something bad you are also very honest and say you are not happy but still don’t reject them. We shouldn’t let our values slip either but be honest with people because that’s part of respecting anybody. We have to offer acceptance and challenge.” (Shrewsbury)

We heard very often of the contrast between the way families approach these ‘real’ versus ‘ideal’ situations and the way that the church does.

“If your children as adults make choices that are not in line with the Church’s traditional teaching it is a challenge for you and the Church. You cannot turn off your love for your children and you have to accept their choices even though they are not your choices for them. I think we as parents can teach the Church something about real love here. The Church needs more humility and the realisation that it is run mainly by those who have only experienced family life as children not parents. The Church in this country will shrink to almost nothing if it doesn’t think about ways of accepting rather than excluding our new family set-ups.” (Portsmouth)

135. What also became clear over the duration of the project was a real sense that every family has experiences of brokenness and failure, although not always visibly so. Many dioceses began their conversations by presenting stories that illustrated the reality of life for families that had responded. These examples were often extremely touching and at different times both painful and encouraging to hear. What struck us were the responses of those who listened with us.

“The stories made us feel overall more normal - nothing surprised or alarmed us.” (Portsmouth)

“We were gratified by the shared experiences. We could all relate to part or some of them in terms of hurting.” (Shrewsbury)

“It’s no longer sustainable to claim that messed up lives are bad.” (Liverpool)

“God talks to people where they are even in their brokenness.” (Middlesbrough)

“Even within marriage people can be lonely.” (Plymouth)

“We were pleased that the survey probably reflected most people’s experiences and yet no-one was saying there isn’t any hope. We felt that this process was about reversing our assumptions about family life - about what is normative and what is exceptional – we feel that these may have swapped places in the last few years.” (Portsmouth)

136. Sharing the difficulties of family life seemed to be an experience that really bonded, healed and encouraged those who took part. However questions were raised about the challenges both for families and for the church in all of this: one participant in Southwark was not alone in his observation that it was hard to see his family as particularly holy when they were in the middle of an argument.

“There’s a need to disentangle holiness from perfection - maybe that’s why people are afraid to say I’m broken.” (Portsmouth)

“Maybe for the church this is the start of a process of growth, of acceptance and understanding of what people have gone through with families. How do we marry the ideal and the reality and sustain people through it all with love. It takes commitment within a family to work it all through. Do we as church have that commitment, especially to those people who are not yet inside the walls?” (Liverpool)

137. What did emerge very powerfully was that any challenging situation could become a source of strength for others enduring similar situations. Individuals could offer each other a great deal through their mutual experiences, but especially through their experiences of hurt and sorrow.

“We had a strong feeling that people want peer help - others like you in the same situation, for example, young marrieds, but the same really went for youth and parental issues.” (Plymouth)

“We would like our Parish community to lift their heads out of the sand and begin to be amazed at the stars in the night sky. There are many people who, with a little encouragement from the ‘powers that be’, would be well able to set up and maintain different types of befriending schemes.” (nk)

138. In all of this we were reminded of Christ, himself the stone that the builders rejected, yet who became the corner stone. There are enormous possibilities for family support within the church by harnessing the wisdom and experience of the faithful. As we note from the documents of the Church:

“..within the ecclesial community - the great family made up of Christian families - there will take place a mutual exchange of presence and help among all the families, each one putting at the service of others its own experience of life, as well as the gifts of faith and grace.”<sup>23</sup>

## **Valuing Difference**

139. At the beginning of the *Listening 2004* process coordinators were asked to ensure that families with a variety of different experiences and abilities took part. The brochure was produced in large-print format, in a variety of languages and was made available on request in Braille and on audio-tape. It was evaluated by the national chaplain to the deaf community. It was good to note both through the brochure feedback and at diocesan conversations that a range of diverse experience did appear to have been accessed, though that gives us no cause for complacency.

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<sup>23</sup> Familiaris Consortio #69

140. The issues identified in feedback and in conversations were extremely varied:
- “Our Down’s Syndrome son is our blessing – his angelic nature, wisdom and spirituality. He is church.” (Liverpool)
  - “We’d like to see a better understanding of how to include everyone, especially in terms of the physical environment.” (Brentwood)
  - “Our second child was born with a club foot. All the hospital appointments meant leaving our eldest child with family, and we had to keep trying to make time for him.” (Salford)
  - “Our handicapped child died in his 20’s. We coped by prayer, help from agencies and church, family solidarity and co-operation.” (Salford)
  - "It is difficult and stressful to bring our autistic child to church, both for us and him." (Salford)

141. A worker in the deaf community identified these issues:

- Support is needed for hearing parents of deaf children (90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents with no experience of deafness or deaf culture).
- Deaf parents with hearing children need communication support especially when the children are moving through parish based sacramental programs. (90% of deaf parents have hearing children.)
- Hearing children of deaf parents need support as they often are given communicating roles beyond their years.
- Application to Catholic schools - due to the lack of local signed Masses many deaf people do not attend their local parish Mass on a regular basis and the parish priest can therefore be unsympathetic to the parents’ request for backing to get their child into the Catholic school.
- A lack of communication support at liturgies and during sacramental preparation. Signed Masses are celebrated in most Dioceses but the location and timing make it difficult for all who wish to attend weekly Mass in their own language.
- Many clergy are unaware of the needs of this diverse group. For people who are hard of hearing a loop system will often provide access, provided that system is always used in the church. People who are profoundly deaf will need signed communication support. The support, technical and human is also needed in church halls for meetings etc.

In 1998 the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales published a report called *Valuing Difference*<sup>24</sup> which outlines a vision and a method for including those of all abilities in the life and work of the church.

142. One housebound parishioner pointed out the hurt that had been caused to those like her, elderly, disabled and lonely, by a Lenten reflection booklet on the topic of family life that had focussed entirely on traditional family structures. Her reaction was that the Church should more clearly emphasise the parallels between home family and church

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<sup>24</sup> Valuing Difference is now only available online at <http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/resource/vald01/index.htm>

family, so that no one felt excluded or unwanted. She felt strongly that there was a place for everyone in the church to give as well as to receive.

“Maybe there should be more home groups of different kinds, which can often be more flexible and offer both spiritual and community involvement. This would indicate a need for more support packs, helping each other to develop the skills necessary to organise successful groups. Including people like me with special needs isn’t difficult and doesn’t necessarily need resources: it often just needs small adjustments, imagination and/or lateral thinking. The priest who cared for my Aunt when she was dying said that the Church loses out on the skills and talents of people like me, because they don’t know how to enable us to serve. People in my situation (it may also be because they’re a carer, or have very young children etc.) often want to be involved. Of course, when we get the Newsletter, we can pray for the needs of the Parish etc., but I’ve extended this to telephone Prayer Partners with whom I pray. I have specifically linked with a Church group, so they know I pray for them regularly and occasionally send little notes to encourage at important times for them.” (Southwark)

143. We heard too from family members in prison, both parents and children. A chaplain to a young offenders institute facilitated a conversation with a group of inmates using the *Listening 2004* brochure.

“It was very soon evident that these young men had had very negative experiences of family so far. Some had been in and out of care and prison for the last eight or nine years. They spoke of family as being the place where they did not get on, where there was no encouragement and where they would be greeted on release with the explicit assumption that they would soon be back inside again. When asked to talk about the positive aspects of family life they talked about those family members who were always there for them, about the home cooking that they missed, and one lad spoke of love as being one of the best parts of family. As they looked ahead to the families which they might help to create, the lad who spoke of love said that having a kid of his own would be the one thing that would change him entirely. He would do whatever he needed for the child, even moving town if he felt that the youngster was in danger from bad influences. We asked them about their expectations of Church. Several responded immediately with the thought that it was the place where you are not judged but accepted and where you can find forgiveness. One made the point that he went once a year (Midnight Mass at Christmas) because he does not read well and felt out of place when everyone was reading along in their missals.” (nk)

A parent in jail spoke of the feeling of love for her children that helped her to survive imprisonment. The corollary of that was the distress that parental separation created for the children involved:

“At school the children cannot concentrate because I am not there with them. I miss them and they miss me. I pray for them.” (Arundel & Brighton)

“I pray for my Mother so that she can cope with anything and I hope she will come out and fight for me, so that I don’t have to get adopted by anyone.” (Westminster – Child’s prayer)

The impact of prison on family life has been explored within a recent publication of the Bishops' Conference *A Place of Redemption*<sup>25</sup>.

144. Throughout the conversations it was very apparent that there will always be a need for the church to make additional efforts to reach these families who have very specific needs, and are sometimes least able to call out for it. We suggest that more work needs to be done within dioceses to access the experiences and needs of families marginalized through disability and disadvantage.

### **Consistency of Pastoral Practice**

145. The question of Eucharistic hospitality is clearly one of immense importance to inter-church families. The Church's official position on this is to direct families to "the norms issued by the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity."<sup>26</sup> These norms have been explained and explored in a document issued jointly in 1998 by the Bishops' Conferences of England and Wales, Scotland and Ireland called *One Bread One Body*. But families are still experiencing difficulty with the consistent application of these norms.

"Recently we have discovered that Holy Communion may be requested under certain circumstances, namely:-

- danger of death or urgent need
- a spontaneous request for the sacrament
- no access to a minister of his own communion
- a faith in the sacraments in harmony with the Roman Catholic Church<sup>27</sup>

I note from one of the Church's own documents, 'This inability to receive Communion regularly feels divisive and does nothing to foster Christian harmony within the home.' This is a fairly accurate summary of our feelings and I believe that by receiving Communion together our lives could move forward in a deeper spiritual way. Our desire to receive communion together constitutes a serious spiritual need. I am encouraged by the comment of Pope John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint* where he uses the words, 'great desire' instead of 'grave and pressing need' to receive the Sacraments. The Church's teaching is *most* unclear on this issue as each bishop can establish his own norms within the general framework. Some bishops are encouraging people to apply for permission; therefore decisions are inconsistent throughout the country. This sounds like a post code lottery. It seems to me that if there can be exceptions then there is no longer a rule." (Liverpool)

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<sup>25</sup> A Place of Redemption: A Christian Approach to Punishment and Prison. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. Burns and Oates, 2004

<sup>26</sup> Familiaris Consortio #78

<sup>27</sup> One Bread One Body: "Admission to Holy Communion and to the sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick may be given to baptised Christians of other faith communities if there is a danger of death, or if there is some other grave and pressing need. This may at times include those who ask to receive them on a unique occasion for joy or sorrow in the life of a family or an individual. It is for the diocesan bishop or his delegate to judge the gravity of the need and the exceptional nature of the situation." OBOB #106

146. Inconsistency in pastoral practice was mentioned in a variety of circumstances: it created a sense of unease and distaste and was sometimes equated with having influence or power or with being of greater social and/or monetary value to the church. A worrying number of participants equated their financial poverty with a lack of standing in their parish. Families mentioned the difficulty of getting babies baptised if you were in an irregular situation or not a regular in a parish: in some parishes strangers would be welcome; in another they would be rejected. In one diocese we heard the phrase 'sacrament shopping'. The response of those who listened with us to these stories was that the Church should be welcoming of all who approached her and use any and every opportunity to develop a relationship and 'grow' a family back into the life of the parish.

"The Church has lost a couple of generations - ages 10-20's and is much poorer for it. There is a lack of consistency too in the priests approach - parishioners can shop around for baptism etc. This has heavily impacted feelings about the Church in the eyes of community." (Liverpool)

"Do not ignore the pain please. A priest – not of this diocese – refused baptism of twins on the grounds that they were conceived by IVF. (Both parents the donors) Do pray for this lovely family." (Brentwood)

147. A related question is the disparity between those who live together outside of marriage and those who remarry 'irregularly' after divorce. It seemed to many participants as if one situation was more acceptable in the eyes of the church even though the other, it could be argued, demonstrated greater integrity. Some expressed views which indicated a misunderstanding of the Church's teaching.

"There's muddled thinking in the church - the divorced remarried can't receive (Holy Communion) but those cohabiting can - I can't see the difference." (Middlesbrough)

148. A minority of participants identified the discrepancy of cradle Catholic priests who had had to leave ministry to get married while married former Anglican priests were still being ordained.

"We think there's an anomaly between married Anglican priests and the Roman Catholic priests who have left to become married." (Portsmouth)

It is apparent that the commitment to celibacy required for priesthood needs greater explanation, perhaps as well as the role of celibacy within marriage.

## **Gender, Sexuality and Fertility**

149. We were interested to note that gender issues did not figure highly in *Listening 2004*. For example, 'fatherhood' and 'motherhood' tended to be bundled together under the issue of parenting, despite national news items during the year highlighting the plight of fathers living apart from their children. But there were some issues that are worth noting. Alarmist press reports which had suggested that the Vatican desired to limit the involvement of women in liturgical service had created a sense of unease.

“We get mixed messages from the hierarchy on various issues, like not having women on the altar and girl altar servers.” (Arundel & Brighton)

150. The current role of women seems to be seen as especially unfair since the church relies heavily on the volunteer labour and good-will of women.

“Women keep the church going.” (Portsmouth)

One of the features of modern life that we have already noted is that women usually have to seek paid work outside the home and have less time for volunteering than in the past. Coupled with other demands on their time, connected with their children’s activities, women are increasingly over-stretched and susceptible to greater feelings of inadequacy and guilt.

“I hope for understanding that women today have a lot of other pressures on their lives and may be very active in the community (and therefore being actively Christian) even if its not visible to the Church.” (East Anglia)

151. The particular gifts of women were affirmed in some diocesan conversations especially as a resource for responding to the concerns expressed.

“There’s a lack of promotion of women as leaders within our church. How can we promote them more highly because they are better at listening - active listening, dialogue, setting up departments and working collaboratively?” (Clifton)

In one diocese appreciation of the importance of the feminine led to calls for further involvement in the ministerial life of the Church:

“We should welcome women as full members of the church e.g. ordination to diaconate and priesthood for women. We are missing women’s gifts.” (Hallam)

“Women should be included in every group at every level of the Church. Jesus always listened to women.” (Wrexham)

152. The issues around sexuality raised during conversations were very broad, covering marriage, cohabitation, the single state and homosexuality. A grandfather from Liverpool, formerly active in diocesan family support in the post-Vatican II era, sent in his comments:

“I think a major (though not the only) problem is the failure of the Church to re-think certain aspects of its attitude to sexuality. This has alienated so many who should be part of what would be a much larger and livelier Catholic community if most of our children's and grandchildren's generations had remained a real part of it. This is a very great concern which I think any re-thinking of the attitude to and treatment of the family within the Church has to take on board. One has the saddening feeling that so much and so many have been lost in the thirty years since those days of hope. So many, even still practising are disillusioned and hanging on for our individual salvation. The fundamentalist fringe sometimes makes a louder noise than those who still believe but now see little hope, for a long time to come, of the vibrant pilgrim church we thought was coming to birth in the ‘60’s.”

153. A parish group from Middlesbrough sent the following response:



“Previous generations (grandparents) found it very difficult to understand and come to terms with the contemporary morals with regard to sexual habits in the young - sleeping together before marriage etc. Current parents found it difficult to talk through these problems and to discuss the whole issue of birth control and church teaching. Some felt that the document on the family and life in Europe from the Pontifical Council for the Family (Bologna 2003 p5) had made a false connection between contraception and abortion and the rise in the use of the latter.”

154. A young non-practising adult in Southwark expressed his difficulties with the Church:

“Lack of understanding of issues in modern society e.g. birth control, homosexuality, sex outside of marriage.”

155. Some diocesan conversations were to our knowledge attended by those cohabiting or in lesbian or gay relationships. Because of the sensitivity of these situations, this was not always apparent and those involved did not always make themselves known. But the feedback in the brochures and at diocesan listening days did provide much food for thought.

“My friend has lived with her partner for 25 years. They have a beautiful child and try to lead a good life according to Catholic teaching. But she can not take communion, due to her not being married. She would have to say sorry for her relationship. Her partner is not Catholic but embraces the faith. Why should she apologise for leading her life in this way? I see both points of view, the church and theirs but feel if the church was more accepting, less strict on this matter, then people would return.” (Salford)

“The continual message from the church is that homosexuality is so, so dreadful. Our gay son just hasn’t stood a chance. The church has always decried any type of lifestyle for gay and lesbian young people.” (Lancaster)

“My brother is gay, the church has been very intolerant of him.” (Leeds)

“We don’t appear to have any cohabiting Catholics to talk to us here today about their views. We don’t talk to them and address them but tend to judge them and leave them with a feeling of guilt.” (Southwark)

156. A priest contacted us about the pastoral difficulties of working with families in these situations:

“I have just returned from a priests' support group of which I have been a member for twelve years. After much discussion we were very clear that it is not that *Humanae Vitae* was wrong, but its way of teaching about human sexuality is just so unhelpful. The teaching authority of the Church continues to use expressions in describing practices about human sexuality as: "This is intrinsically evil". As long as we focus on describing negative aspects of our sexuality, the Church's teaching will continue to be seen as irrelevant. The Church needs to find out how to proclaim human sexuality positively and refuse to be drawn into the negative.” (Lancaster)

157. Only two dioceses explicitly raised the topic of clerical sexual abuse of children, though occasionally respondents also touched on the question.

“I am a little cynical about the reasons behind the Bishops’ appeal to families with the recent scandals within the church.” (nk)

By and large we sensed both awareness that massive misjudgements had been made by those in authority at the time, and approval of measures that had been put into place in the church since. Nevertheless families requested:

“Liturgies of lament for those affected by abuse, continued open adult dialogue within the Church, at diocesan and parish level, a climate of honesty not secrecy, and an openness in facing scandals with genuine heartfelt sorrow for wrongs done. Help should be offered to those damaged by those scandals and thorough monitoring continued to stop situations developing into scandals.” (Hallam)

158. A number also mentioned the enforcement of celibacy for priests as being unrealistic and unnecessary.

“Celibacy for the priesthood should be optional.” (Hallam)

“Celibacy is an unnatural state for a lot of men.” (East Anglia)

“Priests should be allowed to marry and enjoy family life - if they wish to do so. This would enrich their lives and provide a greater understanding of today's world.” (Cardiff)

“Family life will always seem second best when celibacy is held up as the ideal.” (Leeds)

One participant suggested that the whole of the Church's teaching in the area of sexuality needed re-examining “from adultery to bad thoughts.” (Middlesbrough)

159. Married people also asked for more work to be done in the area of sexual theology:

“The sexual act is procreative and it is also, or should be, an expression of love. The church’s traditional teaching has been mainly based on the procreative aspect. I feel that the church’s theology of sex should be opened up to a process of prayer, study, debate and consideration. I feel that the Church owes it to all those who suffer under the present situation to at least be willing to go through this process: to understand lovingly, out of compassion, to see what can be done.” (Middlesbrough)

160. Responses in the area of sexual ethics and family planning were very disparate. We heard suggestions that contraception was no longer an issue for the younger generation, but that the older generation still resented the church’s teaching in this area:

“The ban on contraception was hard, sex isn’t all its cracked up to be and the fear of pregnancy added to its woes.” (Westminster)

“Some replies were critical of the church and her antiquated teachings especially when it came to contraception and divorce.” (Brentwood)

“Contraception is not seen as the issue it once was for Catholics - today many make up their own minds over this matter. Indeed the view was expressed that this matter was seen as the one that got Catholics beginning to think for themselves.” (Shrewsbury)

161. We met a young woman in East Anglia who had been commissioned by her fellow parishioners to come to the diocesan conversation precisely to share how difficult and unreasonable the ban on artificial contraception was. In the same diocese we met a young man who was equally keen to make the teaching of the church on fertility awareness more widely known. In a report of a parish council conversation the topic was not broached at all until the priest himself suggested it might no longer be an issue for his parishioners. He told us what happened next:

“The lid came off. A great deal of anger and resentment began to be expressed. The group (mainly in the 45-60 age group) spoke of how they believed that *Humanae Vitae* had in two or three of their cases almost caused their marriages to rupture. They had tried to keep Church teaching, some had had unplanned conceptions and births that stretched their relationships to breaking point, some persisted in keeping the Church's teaching for a while - all seemed to have ultimately 'given up'. The reasons they gave was the sense of deep disappointment that Paul VI did not heed the conclusions of the Pontifical Commission which had advised him, so that, locally, the teaching by the clergy on HV had now collapsed. The people felt the Church had been discredited, the clergy seemed to believe that the Church had been discredited and simply stopped teaching HV. As they were angrily telling me all this, they said that they had felt so let down. They had tried to obey the teaching of the Church and the teaching was abandoned by default.

These people's children and grandchildren are hardly aware of HV. The Council members said that they have never spoken to their children about it. They felt too angry, let down and confused. They rarely asked advice because it depended on whom one spoke to, they no longer trusted the Church in these matters. This was why it hadn't been discussed in *Listening 2004*. "Let sleeping dogs lie", they said. Yet, it seemed to me, that they were expressing a real sense of being distressed by, distrustful of and in fear of the moral teachings of the Church. All they held on to was that conscience was supreme.” (Lancaster)

162. In the same diocese however the diocesan conversation on this topic demonstrated a divergence of opinion:

“Group A agreed that we need to encourage a more pastoral and conscience based approach to contraception.... Group B looked at the issue of contraception and agreed that a review of the teaching would be welcomed but that the issue was still highly controversial - we had no sense of the direction that a review would take!” (Lancaster)

163. On the one hand we heard suggestions that priests are afraid of speaking about sexual ethics for fear of offending people. But we also heard requests that priests speak more about natural family planning.

“We need to understand ourselves as whole people including our fertility.”  
(Southwark)

In one diocese, connected to questions of contraception and chastity, we heard several calls for more activity to broaden awareness of the Pope's teaching on human love in the divine plan.

“If the church was able to make John Paul II’s theology of the body much more widely known and understood people might begin to get a new light on this whole area of marriage and the family - not only the spiritual side but the human side.”  
(Westminster)

164. In some areas the ban on use of condoms even for preventing the spread of disease seemed to create difficulties for parents.

“How can I sustain 2 church going children, in their anger regarding the Church’s response to HIV/AIDS globally? They cannot agree with the condom ban.”  
(Portsmouth)

165. Despite all the contrasting responses, it did become apparent that the church, whilst promoting natural family planning, has yet to offer a coherent national information service for those interested in pursuing this means of controlling fertility. In East Anglia we were told that it is hard for people interested in using natural methods to find information and/or teachers of these methods. Although there are a variety of both informal and formal networks and centres that offer natural fertility awareness services, it might be worth exploring with them the possibility of developing a central point of contact for referrals. Fertility centres also usually provide assistance to couples having difficulty conceiving as well as to those who wish to use the infertile period to avoid conception.

## **Single People**

166. A disturbing aspect of the Listening process was that the focus on families upset many people who did not feel part of a family. The majority of these were single people but others were widowed or childless. There were also large numbers of couples whose children had now left home who declared that they no longer had a family life. These responses provided a range of insights into people’s perceptions both of family and the church’s care for families. Clearly many single people felt excluded by the brochure’s focus but this was exacerbated by a prevailing sense of exclusion from the church community.

“As a single person, I find nothing applicable to my circumstances in this form. As usual, single people seem to count for nothing in the Church’s thinking.”  
(Salford)

“The Catholic Church needs to wake up and do more for single Catholics, both young and old. It needs to do more to help single (or widowed) Catholics to meet single (or widowed) Catholics, to stand a better chance of any resulting children not being lost to the Church. The Church also needs to recognise that single people exist and do not want to be treated as second class Catholics. In my parish it is usually family groups who are invited to do the offertory procession. I haven’t been asked to do this at Sunday Mass since my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday in 1971. Single people still living with their parents will naturally be treated as being in families, but single people like myself, who live alone, also deserve consideration

just as much as do families. We are one person families or households.” (East Anglia)

“As a single person I didn’t feel included in the project but perhaps we could have a project to find out the reality for single people.” (Southwark)

167. Some singles mentioned the efforts they had made to obtain peer and parish support.

“As a family of 1, I invite small groups of parishioners to my home twice yearly because we have no meeting place.” (Plymouth)

Other singles recounted difficulties with the support groups that did exist.

“Because I am divorced they didn’t want me. They only allow you to join if you are free to marry.” (Leeds)

168. Listening to the concerns of single people was upsetting for some participants, who pointed out that the church is a family for everyone:

“I’ve been very sad here to realise how many single people consider themselves not part of a family. There is still an extended family which loves and respects its single members and the church can and does do this. The UCM for example has always welcomed single people as part of the wider family context.” (Southwark)

169. The position of those who remain childless despite longing for children was especially hard. There was clearly some feeling among such couples that the Church does not regard them as families in the fullest sense of the word.

“Where is the church in the life of childless couples?” (East Anglia)

“We have been unable to have children and feel such a failure at Mass.” (Leeds)

## **Inter-Church Families**

170. Difficulties with the church were particularly poignant in those families where there was clearly no lack of faith but rather the challenges of living one family life within two Christian traditions. Inter-church families are those where both adult partners are active within their own traditions and wish to live their family faith life within both traditions.

“Our chief difficulty stems from the fact that the Catholic Church often treats us not as a family, but as individuals. Only the Catholic partner and children are regarded as *really* belonging; the other partner can feel rejected and isolated, or is sometimes treated as a visitor - welcome but *not one of us*. We think that this stems from the fact that the Catholic Church tends to minister to individuals (which is needed of course) rather than to family groupings (which is also necessary, since families are the smallest cells of the church).

As Christian families who believe strongly in the importance of the family grouping, we want to feel we belong to the Catholic Church as a family. On the whole, our experience is that we are more readily treated as family units in the Church of England or the Free Churches (although this is not always so). In particular, it is a great distress to us as couples and families when we cannot share Eucharistic communion when we are together at Mass (although we do

recognise that not all mixed marriages experience this need). Many of us (and many other Interchurch families of our acquaintance) do share the ‘serious spiritual need’ for eucharistic sharing that is already recognised by the Catholic Church, so that in particular cases our needs can be met. Our needs are not restricted to ‘unique occasions’, because marriage needs the continuing sustenance of the Eucharist. It is particularly distressing for people (often in the same diocese) to find that the response of their priests to such a fundamental desire for completion of their shared sacramental lives can be so very different, based upon personal interpretation of the norms. Several couples felt that they were “still here” in spite of the church rather than because of it!” (Association of Interchurch Families)

171. Two other responses provide further illustration:

“One area that we have found very disappointing, hurtful, disrespectful – I’m not quite sure how to describe it – is the attitude to my Anglican husband. He is a committed Christian in the broadest sense & opened my understanding of Christ & the Bible which we read regularly together. We attend one another’s services. Our grown-up daughters attend both forms of Churches. If only the leadership in the Church could support couples of mixed churches it would benefit the Christian Churches on a much wider front. I don’t understand what holds it back. Why so fearful. The non-sharing of communion is awful.” (Northampton)

“My husband and I have been married for over 33 years. He is a practising Anglican and a Eucharistic Minister in his parish. Our home life has revolved around our lives within our own individual Parish Communities and also each other's. Mindful of the Church's teaching we take Holy Communion separately in our own churches- receiving a blessing when we attend together. It has been, and continues to be, a matter of great sadness and pain for us both, that we share our Christian life and Faith, but cannot receive Holy Communion. My husband has given so much to the Catholic Faith and I feel that it is time he was given something in return. He does not want to become a Catholic; he has been confirmed in his own Church. But he believes in Transubstantiation and he just wants to receive the Eucharist with me, his wife, when we attend Mass together every month. I would add that our daughters now have their spiritual life within the Church of England because they do not want divisions within their own married life. I believe that over 80% of Catholic marriages are with a non-Catholic. For too long the Catholic Church has chosen to ignore this group of supportive spouses, and has made Ecumenical noises without addressing the very real, divisive, painful issues that mixed marriages and Interchurch couples experience. Please don't tell us that you ‘understand our pain.’ You don't - you have no idea.” (Liverpool)

## **Divorce and the Eucharist**

172. We heard a lot about the difficulties in church that arise in families where adults remarry following divorce, without having first obtained a Decree of Nullity from a Matrimonial Tribunal. These unions are usually referred to as ‘irregular’, and are subject

to the discipline of the church, that is, those involved are excluded from receiving Holy Communion. This exclusion was frequently mentioned as a major difficulty for families.

“Marrying a divorcee has meant that our marriage has not been blessed and I cannot be a sacramental practising Catholic.” (Cardiff)

“Laws barring people from Communion for marrying a divorced person.” (Westminster)

“After 18 years of marriage to my first husband, sadly it ended in divorce... I then met F having learnt that life must go on and my life picked up tremendously. We married, are very happy and work hard, with life’s ups and downs, our families, our commitment to God and to our churches. F goes to his church every week but cannot receive communion. It hurts me very much. It feels like my fault. F won’t talk to his priest about it. I feel as if I’ve broken the law but we all make mistakes in life.” (Leeds)

173. Grave difficulties were created for parents in this situation who were trying to raise their children in the Catholic faith. We heard heartrending examples of the pain of this exclusion at key moments such as their children’s first holy communion, their weddings, and even at funerals. The problems in the church arising from divorce and remarriage are clearly damaging to all those affected - church and families themselves. One diocese (Plymouth) identified it as the major reason why congregation numbers are declining.

“Divorce affects family life.” (Lancaster)

“Divorced parents don't figure in the church.” (Westminster)

174. We heard much less about resolution and acceptance – and very little about annulment.

“In terms of people’s feedback (concerns regarding) people who were not attending Holy Mass appear to take first place. This related to either young people (16+) or the large number of people whose marriage had foundered and were in a second relationship. Some of the latter still attend the Church but say they feel like second class Catholics being unable to receive Holy Communion.”

(Plymouth)

“The Church really needs to undergo the painful process of self-evaluation and ensure creating an outreach in which divorcees have a part to play. The annulment process needs complete overhauling. Currently it is so insensitive and damaging to families.” (Plymouth)

175. One diocese (Middlesbrough) took the opportunity of its conversation day to share the teaching and practice of the church on the validity of marriage, with a presentation by the local Judicial Vicar. It was well received and succeeded in raising awareness among those present. Clearly wider opportunities to hear about and question the juridical work of the Church would help immensely in raising awareness of the processes involved and encouraging a sense of approachability towards the Marriage Tribunals. Such a need was noted at other diocesan conversations.

“We were surprised at the information on annulment and realised how little the church does teach on this.” (Portsmouth)

176. When it comes to the crunch, families often experience being caught between their children and the discipline of the Church. This presents them with the challenge of explaining extremely complex situations:

“Divorce prevents some of our offspring from receiving Holy Communion. This gives them the impression that they don’t belong. We try to explain the Church’s teaching on the subject.” (Clifton)

177. We repeatedly heard requests that the practice of excluding divorced-remarried people from the Eucharist be reconsidered.

“There’s not enough understanding on behalf of our Catholic Church. Bashing people instead of a supportive ear. Can’t receive sacraments at people’s lowest hour. Life is very difficult for most people all the time. Listen to people’s point of view & try to learn.” (East Anglia)

“To tell people who are not ‘in good standing’ to stay away from Communion is like telling people who are cold to stay away from the fire.” (Menevia)

178. These requests did not come only from those personally affected but from a significant proportion of the participants in *Listening 2004*. Many families had at least indirect experience of divorce and remarriage and the practice was most often interpreted as representing a lack of forgiveness and mercy on the part of Christ’s church. This is an issue that was also raised at the 1980 National Pastoral Congress in Liverpool and it has clearly not gone away:

“While the question of divorce is daunting enough, the questions posed by Catholics who enter a second irregular marriage are even more searching. Can they ever be admitted again to Holy Communion? May they ever have their second marriage blessed by the Church?”<sup>28</sup>

179. It is interesting to compare the views expressed by the faithful on this topic with the following statement:

“If these people were admitted to the Eucharist the faithful would be led into error and confusion regarding the church’s teaching about the indissolubility of marriage.”<sup>29</sup>

We heard many participants express their view that the clear rules and teaching of the Church about the indissolubility of marriage obscured the Church’s other priorities of forgiveness, mercy and redemption.

180. Another issue that was often raised as a comparison was the perceived disparity between the treatment of priests who had sexually abused children and of lay people who had divorced and remarried. It seemed inexplicable to some that divorce and remarriage appeared ‘unforgivable’ compared both to child abuse and permitting the abuse to continue. The distinction between continuing in a state of life which is not in accordance with the Church’s teaching and forgiveness of sin is clearly not easily understood. The church’s solution in irregular marriage situations of repentance coupled with cessation of sexual relations was often seen as unrealistic and damaging to the second marriage.

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<sup>28</sup> The Easter People #109

<sup>29</sup> Familiaris Consortio #84



“A married couple have never taken a vow of celibacy. Their vows pledged themselves to each other: ‘one flesh.’ Told to live celibately they experience a grave problem: they find themselves still in love, still living together, most probably still sharing the same bed. Most will find this too hard, seek their own solutions and end up feeling guilty failures and outcasts from the sacraments. Can this be right?” (Middlesbrough)

Very often these marriages were not perceived by those closest to them as lacking in fruitfulness, but rather as an actual moment of renewed life for adults and children alike. During a very moving account of such a union in one diocese we heard of a young child giving thanks when her mother remarried saying, “We are a family again now.”

181. What did become clear however is that some people believed that it was divorce itself that prevented individuals from receiving Holy Communion. They were in effect excluding themselves unnecessarily from full participation in the Eucharist. A Catholic teacher we met at one diocesan conversation day had also been unaware that her own divorced mother was entitled to continue to receive Holy Communion.

182. In the course of the conversations the bishops produced their document *Cherishing Life* which makes the teaching clear:

“It is important to emphasise that seeking or receiving a divorce, where there are serious and objective reasons for it, is not in itself a barrier to receiving communion.”<sup>30</sup>

By the end of 2004 we were encouraged to hear participants refer to *Cherishing Life* as a useful resource.

“It’s very accessible, very readable and covers many issues and it would be a great shame if that, like so many documents, was left to gather dust.” (Southwark)

183. We recognised that emphasis on the importance of regular Communion is unhelpful to those unable to participate. A possible answer to this problem was the practice of spiritual communion. The days when the Eucharistic fast was much longer than one hour were mentioned. In that era there was often a Mass when very few went to Holy Communion because they had broken the fast, thus providing ‘more cover’ for those unable to receive.

## **What Can We Learn From This?**

184. All that we heard illustrated the great complexity of pastoral ministry with families, especially in the light of teaching which is inevitably demanding, but which can be experienced as unnecessarily harsh if not applied or proclaimed sensitively. The diocesan conversations were established to listen to the whole reality of family life, which inevitably included a reality which can nearly be as painful to listen to as it is to live through. Nevertheless the consistency of church teaching was much appreciated by families. It was a source of great strength to them, most apparently where *gospel values* of mercy, forgiveness, love, compassion and acceptance were concerned. Ordinary

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<sup>30</sup> Cherishing Life #136

Catholic families seem often to have difficulty relating these gospel values with the position of the Church on some issues. In situations where there seems to be a discrepancy between the two, the sense of the faithful suggested to us very strongly that love, justice, mercy and forgiveness should prevail over rules, regulations and their often painful consequences.

185. Secondly, we see a huge need for better communication and deeper understanding of Church teaching in the area of marriage and family life, especially as it applies to real family experience. Families seem to be able to endure hardship if they can make sense of it in spiritual/religious terms and if they can see it as just. The alternative scenario, where meaning and justice are experienced as lacking, is a recipe for estrangement. The vision of the family as domestic church and an appreciation of family and marital spirituality seem to be two areas in particular that are crying out for more theological reflection *by the whole community*. The teaching authority of the church would be wise to approach the topic of marriage and family life in a spirit of humility, making concerted efforts to draw on the diversity of lived experience of those at the grass roots.

186. Thirdly, the importance of the church community as an extended family of acceptance, celebration and support is absolutely indispensable if the relationship between church and family is to be sustained, healed and capable of renewing the life both of families and the church. Over and above any other single finding in *Listening 2004* was our realisation of the massive significance to families of welcoming, loving, accepting relationships, both at home and in the church. The parish or small church community is in a unique position to offer family-like emotional, psychological and spiritual nurturing for those who are lonely, alienated and marginalized as well as for others in need of community. As a member of the Union of Catholic Mothers said in Arundel and Brighton, "It's in small groups that people know each other's needs and also where and how they can help."

187. Fourthly, the church already has many opportunities to make or renew contact with all families through programmes of sacramental initiation and especially at key moments of life change: births, deaths and marriages. The church also possesses much experience and strength in its existing ministries with families, through a wide variety of agencies, organisations and voluntary associations, but also through the ordinary families who make up the church. What seem to be lacking are vision, leadership and direction for parish family ministry so that local leaders know what to do and where to begin. There was certainly no evidence of a lack of commitment on the part of those we listened to, to be part of the church's support for family life. But practical support for their enthusiasm will be needed as well as an awareness of and flexibility in accommodating the limitations of family time and energy. The suggestion that parishes adopt the practice of appointing a 'family contact' raises the issue of this role being a shared responsibility; Jesus sent his disciples out two by two and that is an excellent model to follow (bearing in mind that a married couple, for practical reasons, should certainly be regarded as one person in these situations).

188. We heard a number of suggestions as we went around the dioceses:

- “What do we need more of? Support for families at parish level, parent toddler groups, Masses, marriage preparation, children’s liturgy, but often the people who cant do that are parents of young families because they have their hands full. We need more volunteers maybe not from that sector but from others, older parents perhaps.” (Shrewsbury)
- “We need opportunities for further listening, formation and discussion groups on Church teaching as well as prayer and scripture, and a better understanding of relationships. Church teaching must be in modern English and be understandable. We need to convey the sound reasons underpinning Church Teaching. Has sin lost its meaning?” (Arundel & Brighton)
- “Mentors for young married couples are available in some parishes - helping couples to live the sacrament of marriage - trained mentor couples on hand to offer advice on living marriage as a sacrament.” (East Anglia)
- “From the pulpit we hear from lay people only when they are asking for money but rarely hear their input such as like this today – there is no reason why we could not go into parishes and do this kind of day there.” (Shrewsbury)
- “Many people feel marginalized and we need to do something about this: the key word here is welcome. Welcome them at the church door and after they have come through. Acceptance is another key issue and we had a big debate about it. We concluded that we are living now as Christians in a world which often rejects our beliefs so acceptance is of situations not of values. Young people said they felt left out of many things but they also felt that adults were left out too especially the divorced and separated. We suggested a contact in each deanery could establish a network of caring services and support groups. We felt it was important to create opportunities for dialogue within church and within parishes.” (Cardiff)
- “Support from engagement throughout family life, accessibility to all who need it, couples to be supported in parishes, communication skills widely in community - older couples put to work, family supportive community at all stages, domestic church encompasses family of faith.” (Westminster)
- “It’s a struggle to promote family accessible activity throughout our church, in parishes, deaneries, organisations, agencies etc and to do this effectively we probably need to do a bit of an examination of what’s going on now - how accessible is our church life to all families. Who would do this examination? We should.” (Shrewsbury)
- “The Church is a family and should witness the feeling of belonging. It should celebrate marriage and family life, support divorced, separated, same sex etc. with love and care. There should be clarity on belief and practices and the Catholic ethos should be more actively promoted.” (Westminster)
- “With the right vision and some empowering and supporting, parish families could organise family retreat days, parent and toddler groups, youth groups and programmes of support for marriage partners, all of which would build up a family spirituality and help develop strong, healthy Catholic family life, and this would spill over into the whole parish.” (nk)
- “When we lived in the north, the local Catholic Church offered lots of practical help with parenting classes, mother and toddler groups as well as nuns who came

out to see us when we moved to the area to offer advice on local shops, doctors, dentists etc. This made a huge impact on our lives with the church, and indeed our faith. This is very different from our present parish where very little practical help is available.” (nk)

- “We need more focus on marriage - a vision for marriage so we can share the joy, small communities where people can feel welcomed and supported and teams of people who are trained in parishes to support families. What’s on offer after confirmation? We need places where teenagers can go and kick around ideas about life.” (Portsmouth)

## Chapter 4. Family Needs: Priorities for Church and Family Action

189. Virtually every diocesan conversation devoted time to discerning practical ways in which families, their parishes and the wider church could address the challenges and needs identified by families during *Listening 2004*. We have mentioned many of the practical ideas already but it is worth pointing out that for the most part grass roots approaches were identified as being the priority.

“Local solutions are the only things which fit local needs” (Portsmouth)

190. Many of the suggestions we heard recurred in diocese after diocese. They therefore became strong indicators to us of the direction that future work in support of marriage and family life should take. The suggestions made were usually relatively simple and straightforward (and therefore achievable), by comparison with the complexity of many of the issues raised. But especially encouraging was the willingness, expressed by so many we met and listened to, to be part of the ‘solution’.

“Let us be involved in the next step because I'd love to do all this again.”

(Brentwood)

“There was little doubt that two dominant themes were that lay people stood ready to serve and to offer their variety of talents and that they looked to the clergy for a positive, constructive and collaborative lead in their efforts to advance the work of God’s church, in answer to the problems faced by the family in today’s society.” (Menevia)

“Families asked to be allowed to become more involved in the life of the church and to put their gifts to use in service of the community.” (Middlesbrough)

We are therefore extremely optimistic about the opportunities that exist for the church to fulfil her mission of becoming ever more ‘loving of families’<sup>31</sup>. Nevertheless, this willingness must be considered in the context of the challenges families are already facing in balancing their home, work and family lives. Creative means must be found of enabling families to put their gifts and talents to the service of each other, without any collateral damage to or additional stresses on those doing the giving. We suggest that families are those best placed to identify how this particular tension might be resolved.

191. We have identified three areas that we see as being of overarching importance to families and therefore to the church in our efforts to support marriage and family life:

- Welcoming, Family-Sensitive Parish Communities
- Marital and Family Spirituality
- Equipping Parents for Passing on Faith

### 1 Welcoming, Family-Sensitive Parish Communities

192. Many diocesan conversations identified a need for more welcoming and family-friendly local parish communities as the foundation of care and support for all, but

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<sup>31</sup> Familiaris Consortio #86

especially for families. There were very many pragmatic reasons why this was so important. Knowing one another at more than a superficial level is vital if we are to understand and respond to each other's needs and strengths. If we feel welcome, and accepted for who we are, then our parish family is more likely to be a place we can turn to in times of joy and sorrow as well as a place where we are receptive to further opportunities for growth. The parish generally offers us an opportunity to meet others with the same values and sometimes the same experiences. The crippling sense of isolation and loneliness experienced by many within our fragmented communities can be alleviated by a warm, concerned, sensitive parish or small group community.

193. These often intangible benefits of belonging were identified over and over again as the crucial first step in any programme of support for marriage and family life. One diocesan coordinator explained it thus:

“The great killer in modern life today is isolation, the belief that this is only happening to us. We think that we are the only parents whose teenagers are breaking our hearts, the only ones in a financial mess, the only couple who does not feel in love just now. The strange thing is that the knowledge that it's not just us does not depress us, rather it lifts us, as we try to face what we know others have battled through. We need somebody to walk with us, to see us through those darker times.”<sup>32</sup>

194. As we listened to families around the dioceses it certainly became clear to us that sharing stories of family life and talking openly about them had an encouraging effect on those who took part. Participants expressed in a variety of ways a sense of no longer being alone or of feeling more normal. We heard many requests for more opportunities for similar conversations at local level. This indicated to us at least that creating time and space for sharing matters of importance to families would be an important aspect of creating welcoming and family-friendly communities.

195. Priests were reaffirmed as leaders of the community and an integral part of welcoming strategies, but very often participants suggested that priests should be relieved of their administrative responsibilities by a more collaborative approach to parish ministry. A welcoming community is led by a priest who has time for his people; lay people have many gifts and talents which can be put to the service of the church.

196. Welcome was identified as something that should be extended to all, regardless. A welcoming and accepting community was frequently identified as the key means by which all families including the most marginalized can be made to feel at home in the church.

“The challenge is to build highly loving supportive communities within our parishes for all of us, including our families.” (East Anglia)

Various ways of doing this were suggested and we have noted some of them elsewhere in this report. Written and human resources were mentioned as well as significant moments such as births, deaths and marriages, moments when the life of the family and the life of

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<sup>32</sup> Care for the Family. A Note to our Partners. May 2004

the church so closely connect. We heard too that in Portsmouth Diocese a programme of adult formation for promoting welcoming parishes already exists and is being used.

197. We heard a clear call for a more family-friendly church, that is, one that knows the reality of contemporary family life and adjusts to accommodate it as far as possible. This includes:

“Encouraging couples to prioritise each other and their relationship; adjusting church timetables to accommodate families stressed by balancing the demands of family life and work; making the home a priority and establishing peer support groups within parishes.” (Clifton)

The challenge of being family-friendly is complex. The terms ‘family perspective’ or ‘family-sensitive’ are also sometimes used to describe the same general aim of creating a church where families *feel* welcome *because* they can *tangibly* discern efforts to understand and meet their needs. A continued commitment to good listening is an integral part of this. Guidelines and suggestions for implementing a family perspective have been drawn up by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops<sup>33</sup>. In this country Churches Together For Families have developed resources for creating family friendly churches.<sup>34</sup> Nationally we in England and Wales might fruitfully explore these and other ways of developing welcoming parish communities. But for each family and for each parish the term ‘family-friendly’ will inevitably mean something different. Local efforts to determine and interpret local priorities will therefore always be important.

## 2 Marital and Family Spirituality

198. As we have already noted, throughout the diocesan conversations it became clear that very little indeed was said about marital or family spirituality. There appeared to be little awareness of the vocational nature of marriage and parenthood or of the specific spirituality of the home (domestic church). When spirituality was considered it tended to be connected only to church-going or to prayer at home, rather than being integrated into the daily living out of family life in response to the Gospel of Jesus. Such an omission indicates perhaps the most significant communication defect of all.

199. We think that the absence of a broad understanding of the holiness of family life works against the deepening of the relationship between families and their parish. The call to holiness is “rooted in baptism.<sup>35</sup>” Christian families “have the ability to manifest this holiness and the responsibility to bear witness to it in all that they do<sup>36</sup>”. We think that a language for understanding and articulating God’s presence through the whole of family life, including the messier moments, could assist families both in making sense of all that they experience and in finding solutions to the many challenges they face.

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<sup>33</sup> A Family Perspective in Church and Society. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Committee on Marriage and Family Life. National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Washington DC.: United States Catholic Conference, 1998

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.churchesandfamilies.org/index.php/resource1/1>

<sup>35</sup> Christifideles Laici #16

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

200. Moreover a greater emphasis by the Church on both marital and family spirituality could increase appreciation or valuing of family life and enrich the wider parish community. Building up the domestic church in no way detracts from the significance of the parish church because they are the same body. We see additional benefits for the catechetical and liturgical life of the Church in being able to describe more accurately the relationship between the human and divine as experienced in family life. As Pope John Paul II wrote in his Letter to Families in 1994, “God himself is present in human fatherhood and motherhood”<sup>37</sup>.

201. At a meeting in February 2005 many of the Listening 2004 coordinators agreed that a broader understanding of marital and family spirituality among both clergy and laity will be fundamental to the success of any future work by the church in support of family life. We find ourselves in the situation where a profound insight which is at the heart of true renewal of family life is virtually unknown, or certainly unclaimed in the responses made by families. How can we remedy this?

### **3 Equipping Parents for Passing on Faith**

202. In the pages of this report we have highlighted a wide range of issues that matter to families. Some of these issues can be usefully supported within parishes and some might more usefully be supported by secular agencies. However, one matter which is of singular importance to parents, grandparents and the wider church is the question of passing on the faith. It’s an area which we think has huge potential for fruitful collaboration and cooperation between families and the church, partly because, as we have pointed out elsewhere, the role of the home in the life and mission of the church remains largely undeveloped and therefore under-resourced.

203. The challenge of supporting parents should not be under-estimated, especially when the means by which this can be achieved are extremely varied. In one diocese, for instance, we heard that the best thing a parent could do for their children was to love their spouse. Yet there is also research<sup>38</sup> to suggest that loving one’s spouse is not enough and that children even seem to fare better if they experience good parenting within a poor marriage rather than poor parenting within a good marriage. Nevertheless sustaining a harmonious couple relationship is clearly important in those families where marriage is intact. In Chapter 2 we noted eight points recommended to churches interested in equipping parents for passing on faith. Four of these are relationship-centred (supporting parental harmony, effective family communication, wise parental control, parental affection) and four are faith-centred (Gospel-oriented parents, the communication of moral values, involvement in service activities, sharing of faith at home). Adopting these eight priorities as the focus for supporting parents would mean making relationship skills training for marriage and parenting much more widely available, as well as encouraging a

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<sup>37</sup> Letter to Families #9

<sup>38</sup> Jay Belsky at the Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues at Birkbeck University of London mentioned his findings at a relationships education conference in February 2005. Source: <http://www.2-in-2-1.co.uk/images/rcpdf/jaybelsky.pdf>



much broader understanding and appreciation of family spirituality and enabling a deeper understanding of what it means for families to be domestic church. These are challenges not only for families themselves but for the wider church, as recently reiterated by Pope Benedict XVI.

“The family and the Church, concretely the parishes and other forms of ecclesial communities, are called to the closest collaboration in that basic duty which comprises, in an inseparable fashion, the formation of the person and the transmission of the faith.”<sup>39</sup>

204. Demand for supporting marriage, developing relationship skills for couples and parents and providing further opportunities for adult formation in the faith was consistent throughout the diocesan conversations.

“Parents expressed a need for more help in raising their children in the Faith, both in terms of deepening their own understanding and being able to integrate it into the life of the home. Adult formation and catechesis were identified as possible ways to address this, as well as a greater emphasis by the Church on the home as a place of prayer, tradition, ritual and Christian witness.” (East Anglia)

“Parenting programmes, marriage preparation, parent and toddler groups and healing ministries such as Rainbows were all identified as key opportunities for supporting the personal development of parents to further enable them to be first teachers of their children. The sanctity of married sexual love was highlighted as an area that deserved affirmation and exploration, with attention given especially to symbolism, spirituality, forgiveness and trust. Marriage support and enrichment was considered to be best offered from within a strong and vibrant parish community, ideally placed to offer couples a life-time of nurturing and encouragement.” (Lancaster)

205. The challenge of paying due attention to the primary role of parents in passing on faith in God will inevitably raise issues of subsidiarity within the process of faith transmission and catechesis. Family-centred catechesis is an area that we recommend for a fuller investigation as parishes and dioceses are challenged to re-examine their catechetical practices and policies.

206. Alongside the need to equip parents we see a further need to continue a conversation about the role and mission of young people in our church. We might easily imagine a situation where parents are effectively passing on faith to their children, yet those children are finding it hard to feel at home in the church. Several conversations suggested a further programme of listening to young people and we feel that this would be an extremely valuable and important project.

207. Furthermore, given the amount of distress that we noted among parents whose children do not practise the faith, we suggest that due attention be given to efforts by the Christian community to heal this pain. This might involve simply providing structures and encouragement for developing peer-support and more opportunities to listen to those affected.

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<sup>39</sup> Benedict XVI. Reflection at inauguration of Diocese of Rome ecclesial congress. 7<sup>th</sup> June 2005.

## Clarity of Communication

208. We identified a significant need for greater clarity and better communication of church teaching, particularly in relation to marriage and family life. We have reported extensively on the issues related to church teaching and pastoral practice already. We noted that many valued what they described as the unchanging nature of Church teaching, though this was primarily in the sense of the gospel values embodied in the life and teaching of Jesus.

209. The particular ways in which Church teaching applies to and affects contemporary family situations are the teachings on which there seems to be the least clarity. Despite the availability of recent documents such as *Cherishing Life* it will undoubtedly take much effort on the part of both priests and people to reduce the amount of misinformation that exists. However, improved communications were seen as one way to facilitate this, for example, greater information sharing about the services that do exist and that are available.

210. Practical suggestions about such improvements included better literature, in the form of posters or directories, and more use of individuals in parishes who might be willing to become a point of contact for those wanting to know more about a particular issue. Naturally the priest was identified as a key person with the knowledge and skills to direct those in need of help, but it was often suggested that families themselves take responsibility for this, through informal networks.

“We thought of appointing a person in every parish to take responsibility for marriage and family life support, working to improve links between families in a parish and having available a directory of help and sources of expert advice for difficult situations.” (Clifton)

“An annual sermon to remind families of the support that is available; creation of an ‘experience register’ to facilitate peer ministry; counselling and information about services and sources of help. A priority was the appointment of a family life ministry contact in every parish to enable information sharing and to act as a resource.” (Leeds)

## Where do we go from here?

211. In an important sense the answer to this question no longer belongs to the authors of this report. One aspect of the *Listening 2004* process was the recognition, acknowledged by many of the Bishops, that whatever does happen in response to *Listening 2004* has to start in the place where it can be most effective: in the homes and parishes where families live out their daily life. This was illustrated quite clearly in a closing comment by the facilitator of Plymouth’s listening day:

“How many Bishops in our diocese? One. How many priests? 79. How many Mass-going Catholics? About 18,000.”

Many other dioceses too recognized the power of the laity to transform their lives for the better. As we have already mentioned, this ability of families to act on their own behalf

has also long been authorised by the Church. Described by Pope John Paul II as “a mutual exchange of presence and help”, the sharing of “experience of life, as well as the gifts of faith and grace” is understood to be “one of the simplest, most effective and most accessible means for transmitting from one to another those Christian values which are both the starting point and goal of all pastoral care.”<sup>40</sup>

212. We suggest however that there is much that Church structures and resources can and should do to facilitate this ‘mutual exchange of presence and help’ as well as to provide the seed-corn for other local self-help initiatives:

### **Encouragement**

- The responsibility of affirming such activity, whilst nourishing and celebrating families as they become “leaders in a new season of hope<sup>41</sup>” resides with the pastors. This could take the form of joint pastoral initiatives, regular local diocesan celebrations and the publicising of concrete examples of the ways in which diverse families witness their participation in the life and mission of the church.

### **Vision**

- Another task of leadership is the articulation of a vision of marriage and family life that empowers, sustains and strengthens families, whilst simultaneously speaking to the diversity of Catholic family life that we have heard. This will undoubtedly require a period of deeper theological reflection on marriage and family life in the light of *Listening 2004*, through symposia or other events.

### **Collaboration**

- The task of continuing to gather couples and families, on general or specific issues, to facilitate the incorporation of their wisdom and gifts in the pastoral ministry of the Church. In the United States, this was described in terms of a process of four elements: awareness that understands, caring that enables, ministry that serves and structures that facilitate<sup>42</sup>. We might see *Listening 2004* as the first part of such a process, in that we now possess a degree of awareness that understands the reality of family life. Nevertheless continued involvement of singles, couples and families in subsequent stages of reflection and action will be important.

### **Sensitivity**

- The task of continuing to evaluate existing Church structures, practices and resources to facilitate what was described in 1993 as “a more sensitive family dimension to existing parish and diocesan activities and services.”<sup>43</sup> We have established that contemporary family life is extremely pressured. Practically speaking, if the church is to build on the gifts and graces of family life it will need to adjust existing practices to facilitate family involvement.

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<sup>40</sup> Familiaris Consortio #69

<sup>41</sup> Pope John Paul II. Address to First World Meeting of Families, Rome, 8<sup>th</sup> October 1994

<sup>42</sup> Doing Family Ministry. Fr Tom Boland. National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers. [www.nacflm.org](http://www.nacflm.org)

<sup>43</sup> Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales Working Party on Marriage and Family Life. 1993

213. We also see a need to keep listening to those families experiencing hurt or disillusionment with the Church. There are some family situations that continue to be difficult for those involved yet a commitment by the Church to continue listening, to continue exploring all possible options for help and healing would seem essential. At the same time it is important to remember that many families' voices were not heard in the Listening 2004 conversations yet they to have a stake in the outcomes from this process.

214. These are all tasks which those in authority in the Church will consider when reading this report. For ourselves, looking back on a year of often hectic travelling and a huge amount of extremely moving listening, we admit to being overwhelmed by families' response to the project. We know that 15,000 families took part in one way or another. When we asked them to talk about their lives, their joys, sadness and hopes we could not tell what we might hear nor where it would lead us. Despite the undeniable pain of many family situations, despite the undeniable disagreements on certain issues, we find ourselves in a place where we can more clearly see families united: united in love for their family members and united with each other in their love of God. Despite all the hype about the state of contemporary family life, we heard that Catholic families continue to live out God's great commandment with vigour. This then will be the source of grace in the months to come.

215. We conclude this part of the *Listening 2004* process with one further quote from all that we heard in the course of the diocesan conversations on marriage and family life.

“If nothing comes back from all this then it will harm the Church, though we know that to some extent we have to do our part.” (Middlesbrough)

## Appendix 1: Methodology

A1. On January 26<sup>th</sup> 2004, at the offices of the Bishops Conference in England and Wales, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor launched *Listening 2004: My Family My Church*, the initiative of the Bishops to celebrate the anniversary of the 1994 International Year of the Family. The focus of this innovative pastoral listening project was a conversation within each diocese designed to establish:

- 1: Who was doing what on behalf of the family, in order to:
  - thank, affirm and encourage them
  - clarify the provision for family encouragement and support that already exists
  - highlight this activity within the faith community and among pastoral ministers
  - identify both gaps in provision and duplication of effort
  - share expertise, information and resources that really work
  - strengthen intra-diocesan relationships and facilitate networking
- 2: The particular provision for marriage preparation and support in the local church.
- 3: Greater clarity within the community regarding:
  - the reality of family life
  - the needs of families
  - the means by which families may effectively be supported by the church
- 4: A deeper appreciation of the importance of the family in the life of the church

A2. Each diocesan bishop appointed a coordinator to facilitate *Listening 2004* locally (see Appendix 4), with the assistance of nationally produced resources and guidance. Nearly every diocese organised a diocesan family listening day attended by the local bishop and Bishop John Hine, Chairman of the Bishops' Committee for Marriage & Family Life, as well as by families themselves and representatives of organisations, agencies and services working with families. The exceptions, for a variety of reasons, were Birmingham, Hexham & Newcastle, Northampton and Nottingham, yet each of these dioceses did participate in other parts of the *Listening 2004* process. In Birmingham, an area family listening day was held very successfully in North Staffordshire.

A3. From its inception *Listening 2004* was referred to as the diocesan *conversations* project. Although the project gathered a lot of information, the means by which this was achieved was also significant. By encouraging families, groups and individuals to talk to one another and by focussing this effort locally, a real sense was created of a local community that truly knows families, loves them for who they are and seeks to serve their needs effectively. Whilst it was important and necessary that bishops be aware of the reality of families' lives, it was no less important for the wider church community to walk for a while in one another's 'moccasins'. Catholic family theology recognises that "one of the simplest, most effective and most accessible means" of family pastoral care is "a mutual exchange of presence and help among all the families, each one putting at the service of others its own experience of life, as well as the gifts of faith and grace."

(*Familiaris Consortio* 69) It is this kind of exchange that was hoped would be brought about through the conversations.

A4. One million copies of the *Listening 2004* leaflet, containing twelve conversation starters (see Appendix 3), were distributed to dioceses to help foster local conversations prior to the diocesan day. The questions were divided into three areas reflecting the three arenas of Christian family life: the home, the world and the Church. Within each area families were invited to consider the difficulties they faced and how they coped with them, the joys or positive support that they experienced and the hopes they had for their family in the future. There was also opportunity to make additional comment if desired. In Lancaster diocese an alternative version of the national brochure was drawn up using similar questions. In Hexham & Newcastle slightly different questions were targeted at a sample of three primary schools and one secondary school.

A5. Guidance for group facilitators<sup>44</sup> was provided by the national office as well as a list of organisations offering advice, information and support ‘when life hurts’. An ‘open forum’ format was devised to help parishes who for one reason or another could not provide an opportunity for small group conversations. Individual responses could also be made locally or online via the national website. Efforts were made in various dioceses to ensure full inclusion of families who might feel alienated from the church. The *Listening 2004* leaflet was available in formats for the visually impaired and was translated into Welsh, Spanish, Portuguese, Swahili and French. Diocesan coordinators were recommended to form steering groups that included representatives from all church organisations and ministries that impact family life as well as from families of different structures. All the national lay associations were informed in writing of the project’s purpose and methodology and their members invited to participate through their local parish and diocesan process.

A6. Throughout the year additional resources were employed nationally to raise awareness of the project and sustain interest in it. Materials were created to celebrate the International Day of Families on May 15<sup>th</sup>. The Day for Life newspaper in July 2004 contained a description of the project and some of the initial findings. The Catholic weekly newspapers carried occasional articles and the Times notably printed a description of the main findings towards the end of the year. These initiatives had varying degrees of success in publicising the project with the Day for Life newspaper being the most evidently effective.

A7. Each diocese was encouraged to stamp its own identity on the *Listening 2004* project. For this initiative to be a benefit rather than a burden it was better that it fitted smoothly within existing diocesan structures, timescales and priorities. Thus one diocese decided to re-use a consultative process designed originally for a diocesan assembly the previous year. Another diocese used the project as an extension of its existing programme of parish renewal. Yet another piloted the process within two deaneries, before planning to extend it across the diocese as a whole over 2004/2005.

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<sup>44</sup> Written by Mark Davis of Time and Space. See [www.listening2004.org.uk](http://www.listening2004.org.uk) for copies.

A8. However dioceses decided to implement *Listening 2004*, the fruit of their efforts to engage families in sharing the reality of their lives, and the result of their enquiries into current support for marriage and family life were brought together at the diocesan family listening day. On those days, the key issues raised by families provided the focus for conversation and reflection. Usually participants were invited to identify appropriate responses by the diocese, the parish and families themselves, to the joys, hopes and difficulties expressed. Each day concluded with a liturgy of healing and celebration.

A9. The impetus for *Listening 2004* arose from a deepening concern for marriage and family life among the Bishops of England and Wales. In 2002 they had created a new staff position of National Coordinator for Marriage and Family Life. Within this new national strategy the purpose of *Listening 2004* was to provide some overall clarity of purpose for the post-holder as well as to engage the whole community in the complexity and richness of understanding, celebrating, nourishing and supporting family life at every age and stage. To some extent the process had no particular anticipated outcomes. There was no desire to prejudice the listening. As Bishop Hine said at the press launch, “There is no point in starting a discussion if you know what the conclusion is going to be, so we cannot tell where we will end up!”

A10. Yet a number of outcomes were anticipated. As a result of *Listening 2004* it was expected that the Catholic community in England and Wales would be better able to concretely identify the primary difficulties facing families, the primary sources of strength sustaining family survival and development, and the areas where families welcomed church intervention on their behalf. Priorities for family pastoral care would be clearer as well as the resources and strategies which had actually been proven to be of most practical value. The bishops would be able to speak with greater authority on matters of public policy that concerned families as well as to articulate an understanding of Christian family life more visibly informed by lived experience. The local church would be more able to “recognise and understand the world in which we live, its expectations, its longings and its often dramatic characteristics.” (*Gaudium et Spes* 4) The laity would have had an opportunity to “manifest their opinion on those things which pertain to the good of the Church” (*Lumen Gentium* 37). Diocesan and parish networks of support and information sharing would have been strengthened, both internally and externally. The responses by families would help the church to concretely highlight the particular role that families play in the lives of individuals, in the world and in the church.

A11. In evaluating the actual outcomes one year later *Listening 2004* coordinators felt that the project had highlighted family life locally at least partially, especially through distributing the brochure and through articles in the diocesan newspapers. Slightly more success had been achieved around the aim of raising awareness of existing services supporting family life and in strengthening existing networks, though some reservations were expressed. Some progress was made in facilitating better collaboration between these networks and in establishing the specific support available for marriage, though further work remained to be done. Often diocesan coordinators were so engaged in distributing brochures, leading local training and awareness-raising sessions and then in collating responses and planning the diocesan day that they simply had no time left in

which to address the other objectives of the Listening process. Often attempts to engage others employed in ministry or service in the diocese failed for one reason or another. However the most valuable outcome for coordinators was the clarification of how life really is for families.

"We got a tremendous sense of how it is, less on what works (to support families), though small, local, attractive (initiatives) arising from needs discerned locally seem to be what works best." (Liverpool)

A12. Participation rates occupied the minds of coordinators and others. With the best will in the world many brochures went out 'cold' as it were, despite the usual Church means of raising awareness and encouraging involvement: pastoral letters, ad clerums, diocesan newspapers and word of mouth via networks both formal and informal. It was interesting to note that by and large the process worked best when coordinators invested a huge amount of time and energy in providing local information evenings or in training parish contacts to promote it locally. The project was like nothing else the Church in England and Wales had done before so comparisons were difficult. The process used was relatively unusual and certainly one that baffled some participants. We had letters referring to the brochures as 'troublesome' and suggesting that a tick-box approach might have been better. One might easily see in this a need for more adult formation in the skills of reflection and discernment. Within the dioceses response rates varied from 0.03% to over 6%. One national Christian family organisation told us that 1.5% was a reasonable benchmark for an exercise of this kind. Only three dioceses to our knowledge had a participation rate below 1.5% of brochures distributed.

A13. Reasons for what some considered a low rate of involvement were suggested in the course of conversations. Disillusionment following the lack of progress since the National Pastoral Congress was one possibility mentioned, along with a general lack of engagement on the part of families with the Church. The pressure on parishes, especially parish priests, might be another possible reason. Anecdotally we heard that in many parishes brochures simply were not distributed. However since one of the main findings was that families are themselves incredibly busy, it is perfectly reasonable to imagine that this also became a practical obstacle to participation. We were told on one occasion that there was just so much that families could say that they didn't know where to begin – they could write a book. Nonetheless hard evidence shows that 15,000 families did contribute a response of some form or other and there was plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest more had talked about the issues raised. One diocesan coordinator questioned whether the lives of those who did not take part were so very different from those who did. "Do they not share some of the same concerns, problems, joys and fears as those who participated?" he asked.

A14. Those who participated in the diocesan family listening days generally speaking welcomed the initiative:

"This is the first time in my lifetime that we've had this conversation and with two Bishops present! We are the Church and it's about time that that was really recognised." (Middlesbrough)



“We were pleased that we have a church prepared to listen and that there was understanding and knowledge of where people are.” (Portsmouth)

“The fact that the leadership of the Church in this country has promoted this Listening exercise has, I feel, been welcomed and appreciated by those taking part in it. It has given an opportunity for people to focus on a most important part of their lives, namely, family life itself. The bottom up approach in looking at important issues concerning family life is significant. We can only hope that it will guide the thinking of the leadership when it comes to making its response. That said, there is a feeling that the exercise itself has been of value, judging by the comments received. That I know was stated at the outset as one of the aims of *Listening 2004*.” (Shrewsbury)

A15. Overall we sensed that *Listening 2004* was extremely beneficial for those who took the opportunity to get involved.

“Prior to completing this questionnaire I had not considered the world nor the church’s involvement in the development of family/community life. This questionnaire has facilitated self reflection about the ‘here and now’ and the past. This has been a healing process. Many thanks.” (Cardiff)

Nevertheless we remain acutely aware that expectations are high that something positive to help families will come of this year long initiative. This report is the next stage in enabling change to come about.



## Appendix 2: What the Bishops Said

“The three main themes identified as areas where you want to see some more work done were young people, the Church's teaching, and making our parishes more welcoming places. But you can't make a parish a welcoming place just by having someone at the door smiling. The whole of the parish needs to be a place of welcome, with some genuine sense of family - professional, corporate hospitality will not work in church.”

Rt Rev Kieran Conry. Pastoral Letter 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2005

“A lot of very, very good things have come out of today and it's excellent to see so many people here, and to hear the responses. But it mustn't remain here. It comes back to all of us to see what kind of groups can be formed at local level and especially in the parishes to support marriages that are going well and others that are experiencing difficulties. It is the beginning, as they say, of a process.”

Rt Rev Thomas McMahon. Chelmsford. 12<sup>th</sup> September 2004

“It's the first time that I can think of that the bishops have asked for something like this and it seems to have been a very fruitful process. Generally speaking, I'd say we should rejoice in the families that we have. The press are always taking the line of the negative. They will never tell you two-thirds of marriages survive, sometimes with grave difficulty. Now it's for you to say 'what have I heard today, what ideas have I picked up, what can I do in the parish?' This has got to grow in the local community because every parish is different. We'll obviously look at how can we support these initiatives, how can we develop better networking and communication as to what is available, but it's got to start with you.”

Most Rev Peter Smith. Cardiff. 20<sup>th</sup> November 2004

“Today is a day for speaking honestly, in truth, with love. When we speak about the Church, we are speaking about us. The things we've talked about today are not just for someone else to do, they are for all of us here to take responsibility for, together.”

Rt Rev Declan Lang. Trowbridge. 5<sup>th</sup> June 2004

“Your family life should be a burning bush, a place where people encounter the fire of God's love. That includes your children, that includes each other, that includes all those who visit you in your home. The school and the parish are there to support parents and families in their vital vocation of nurturing children in the faith, of inspiring them with the seeds of the Gospel.”

Rt Rev Michael Evans. Bury St Edmunds. 15<sup>th</sup> May 2004

“It's been an extraordinary day. I think it's possible to be too downhearted at the moment about all sorts of things but also marriage. You can easily get a very wrong picture. There are good things going on and we need to remember those good things. We need to support them and we need to build on them, as well as challenging people when necessary.”

Rt Rev John Rawsthorne. Rotherham. 13<sup>th</sup> November 2004

“This is a listening occasion so there are no easy answers. But what has become very clear to me today is that we are not developing an agenda for the priests but an agenda for you, the church. Together we must reflect on what’s been said to develop a way forward, working together. We have to think about it very, very carefully because this is something in which we are all very deeply involved. This is just the beginning of the listening process.”

Rt Rev Patrick O’Donoghue. Lancaster. 25<sup>th</sup> September 2004

“What you do in your family life is very close to the heart of the Church and therefore to the heart of Christ. I want to thank all those involved in the building up of marriage and family life, bringing life to one another. The responses from families have made interesting and very provocative reading – provocative in the best sense of the word. They are a wonderful start in the journey we must make, because family is the cement of society, the cradle of the church.”

Rt Rev Arthur Roche. Leeds. 13<sup>th</sup> June 2004

“*Listening 2004* has been an unexpected gift, providing much food for thought and challenge. But there’s a phrase which we’ve had around for a long time and that is domestic church. I think there is something very, very valuable here and it may lead us to understand one part of our diocesan life in a new way. We can affirm lots of things we do with new vitality and this will help us.”

Most Rev Patrick Kelly. Liverpool. 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2004

“If we are going to help our young people it’s got to start at the roof of the house. That’s where we begin. More and more as I go through life I’m aware of my gratitude to my parents, to my mother and father, to our family life together. For me the concomitant of that gratitude is a desire to do much more for family life in our diocese than we have done thus far. We’ve heard today of some wonderful examples of people’s work and lots of different initiatives in different parishes. But one of the things I’ll take away from today is that that’s not enough.”

Rt Rev John Crowley. York. 11<sup>th</sup> September 2004

“Even though some people may be restricted by our understanding of marriage, its indissolubility and so forth, there are still many ways in which people can in fact still belong. But what we are shaped by is received as gift, we don’t make it up. It comes to us from revelation and that’s very important. As human beings we respond to it and this is often messy. Our day to day pastoral work involves dealing quite often with messy situations, including our own. But it’s all there now, the cauldron is boiling, the fire is on, and the Lord is saying do something about it. You’re the people in 2004: get on with it. Others will come after you and take up where you have left off. I think our contribution now is crucial. But whatever happens at national level won’t actually be particularly helpful unless it impacts locally, in your parish communities.”

Rt Rev Christopher Budd. Buckfastleigh. 9<sup>th</sup> October 2004

“What I think is emerging increasingly in the life of our diocese in all sorts of ways is a caucus of adult responsible Christian people who have the Church at their heart, who know what is needed and have the capacity to begin to put these things into practice. I will be with you all the way but our diocese isn’t a hierarchical structure, it is the people

of God. Within that people there are some who minister as priests and deacons, others who minister as married people, others who minister in a million different ways. We all make our contribution. All I can do is to say to you, go ahead, do these things. Some of them we will get right, some of them we won't get right, but the great thing is that we should be engaged. You have found your voices on marriage and family life – don't lose them now."

Rt Rev Crispian Hollis. Basingstoke. 16<sup>th</sup> October 2004

"The place where you experience God's love best and most beautifully and richly is in your family, in your home, in your marriage. That's one of the things that the family of the Church is seeking to recall, to bring back and understand. To support marriage and family life there are things we need to do and things we need to get together. And as we've listened today those different things have been shared with us. We can say yes, we have them, but we need to develop them, we need to find resources to encourage them to grow."

Rt Rev Terence Brain. Salford Cathedral. 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2004

"Today I suggest that we take as a motto 'Celebrating it as it is.' By that I am suggesting that we recognise the messiness that is the human condition and that is at the heart of living and that we celebrate marriage and family life as it is, for good and for less good. That involves an attitude towards failure and messiness which is compassionate and forgiving and supportive."

Rt Rev Brian Noble. Hartford. 6<sup>th</sup> November 2004

"The Second Vatican Council described the family as the domestic church. There is no substitute for the family both as the context and framework for human growth and development and also for the developing and growth of faith. We can have all the programmes and packages for spiritual development and catechesis that we like but nothing can substitute for the handing on, the seeding and growth of faith that happens in the family. So it's especially important to listen, to hear, to understand, to discern together the present situation, what's happening and what God is calling us to do and to be in the future."

Most Rev Kevin McDonald. Southwark. 30<sup>th</sup> October 2004

"The Catholic Church feels very strongly about the family. I am delighted that many of you who are in the congregation today have come from all parts of the diocese for the listening day for the family. We need to do all we can to support, sustain and promote marriage and family life, striving for the ideal as Our Lord would want us to do. We know very well the difficulties, sometimes the separations and breakdowns. But I'd like to thank all of you, especially those of you who are parents, for all that you have done, amidst all the struggles, to bring up your children in the faith, to be faithful and to persevere. Pope Paul used to call the family the little church. Many of us have great reason to be thankful to our parents, for what they gave to us in their love."

His Eminence Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor. Westminster Cathedral. 15<sup>th</sup> November 2004

"Not only have we been communicating with each other here, and networking, but more importantly I think we've had a real experience, through the prism of these issues, of

being together, of sharing together as a diocese and that's very important for us. Two issues have come out quite strongly: communication and how we each can find ways of communicating the rich teaching of the Church and, secondly, what some have described as befriending, providing pastoral support by married people for married people on the one hand and providing support for passing on faith in the family on the other. The work of *Listening 2004* in the diocese will not end here. We have a process that must continue and there are many people here who are willing to be part of that process."

Rt Rev Bernard Longley. Westminster. 15<sup>th</sup> November 2004

"We are here today because the bishops want to listen. We are here in order that you may speak and the bishops may listen and learn. The teaching church must be a listening church if it is to teach properly. We just can't let go of what has been achieved this afternoon. It's so very important that it is taken forward both by the Bishops' Conference, the diocese, and at local level. We have got to look at all these questions because they impinge upon our whole way of living as Catholic Christians."

Rt Rev Edwin Regan. Llandudno. 19<sup>th</sup> June 2004

## Appendix 3: Text of the Listening 2004 Brochure

### The Catholic Church in England and Wales Tenth Anniversary Celebration UN Year of the Family

Now is a time to ask ourselves, as a family, as a church, what is life like right now for families – for all families, whatever family means to you.

What are your joys, your sorrows, your hopes?

What do you really want from your church?

This year every Catholic diocese has set aside a special day to listen to you and other families in your area. You can help to shape this day by responding to the questions in this leaflet. Why? Sharing our difficulties, our blessings and our hopes will help us all to see more clearly what we can do together, with God's help, to build a stronger future for families, at home, in the wider community and in our church.

#### What to do - on your own, with your family or with others

- You might want to have some friends over for coffee to talk about these questions
- Find out if your parish or school is inviting families to meet together
- Share these questions with your work colleagues – what do they think?

Perhaps some of these words highlight your joys or concerns?

Living with difference? Communication? Time & juggling priorities? Money? Loss? Children & young people? God's presence. Sickness? Ageing? Conflict? Forgiveness? Leisure? Celebration? Loneliness? Addiction? Work? Media? Taxes & benefits? Technology? Health & social services? Housing? God's presence. Crime? Education? Human rights? Peer pressure? Values? Prayer & celebration? Parish support? Caring ministry? Passing on faith? God's presence. Welcoming families? Sacraments? Education? Inter-church & inter-faith issues?

Send your responses to your diocesan coordinator. If any issues raised in answering these questions are a problem for you, or for someone you know, your diocesan contact can also advise on services that may help.

#### Ground Rules for Groups

Listen, share and accept each other's experience and feelings. Respect confidentiality and the right to be silent. Don't hog the conversation. Respect another's right to be silent. Listen & check to ensure mutual understanding. Remember that God is present. For more guidance contact your local coordinator.

Closing Prayer: God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

**Conversation Starters:**

Listening to my family

What are the difficulties you face as a family? How do you cope?

What do you enjoy most about your family life? What are the high-points and the blessings?

What are your hopes for your family?

What else do you want to say about family life at home?

Listening to families in today's world

Does today's world make family life difficult for you? If so, how do you cope?

How is your family life helped by the world around you?

What do you hope for as a family from the wider community?

What else do you want to say about family life in today's society?

Listening to families in the church

What difficulties do you experience as a family in the church? How do you cope?

How does the church help you in your family life?

What do you hope for as a family from the parish community in which you live?

What else do you want to say about family life in the church?



## Appendix 4: Diocesan Coordinators of Listening 2004

### **Arundel & Brighton**

Tessa Ricketts, Barbara Wallace & Liz James, DABCEC, 4 Southgate Drive, Crawley, RH10 6RP

### **Birmingham**

#### *Birmingham Pastoral Area*

Very Rev. Canon P. Browne, 14 Spring Road, Edgbaston Birmingham B15 2HG  
Email: [b15@pbrowne.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:b15@pbrowne.fsnet.co.uk)

#### *Oxford Pastoral Area*

Canon Tom Farrell, 27 Hensington Road, Woodstock, Oxon, OX20 1JH  
Email: [Thomas-farrell@beeb.net](mailto:Thomas-farrell@beeb.net)

#### *Staffordshire Pastoral Area*

Mgr. Pat McKinney, The Rocks, 106 Draycott Road, Tean, Staffs, ST10 4JF

#### *Wolverhampton Pastoral Area*

Canon Kevin Dunn, 23 Birmingham New Road, Wolverhampton, WV4 6BL

### **Brentwood**

Martina Coyle, Marriage & Family Life Ministry, Cathedral House, Ingrave Road, Brentwood CM15 8AT  
Email: [martinacoyle@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:martinacoyle@blueyonder.co.uk)

### **Cardiff**

Anne Ballard, 408 Western Avenue, Cardiff CF5 2BL  
Tel: 029 20212821  
Email: [myfamilymychurch@rcadc.org](mailto:myfamilymychurch@rcadc.org)

### **Clifton**

Deacon John Proctor, Alabaré House of Prayer 15 Tollgate Road, Salisbury SP1 2JA  
Email: [johnproctor@alabare.freeserve.co.uk](mailto:johnproctor@alabare.freeserve.co.uk)

### **East Anglia**

Mr and Mrs A. Clark, c/o The White House, 21 Uppgate, Poringland, Norwich NR14 7SH

### **Forces**

Sqn Ldr Matt Mc Kevitt, Engineering & Supply Flight, RAF Honington, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk IP31 1 LT

### **Hallam**

Susan Tym & Martin Harpham. St. Wilfrid's Centre, 524 Queens Road, Sheffield S2 4DT  
Email: [mharpham@ukonline.co.uk](mailto:mharpham@ukonline.co.uk) or [suetym@ukonline.co.uk](mailto:suetym@ukonline.co.uk)

### **Hexham & Newcastle**

Eddie Donkin, Our Lady Queen of Peace, Station Road, Penshaw, Tyne & Wear DH4 7JZ

### **Lancaster**

Paul Marley, c/o Bishops House, Cannon Hill, Lancaster LA1 5NG

### **Leeds**

Breda Theakston, Family Life Ministry, Hinsley Hall, 62 Headingley Lane, Leeds, LS6 2BX  
Email: [flm@flm.org.uk](mailto:flm@flm.org.uk)

### **Liverpool**

Margaret Rogers & Fr. Tony Slingo, LACE, Croxteth Drive, Sefton Park, Liverpool L17 1A  
Email [m.rogers@rcaol.co.uk](mailto:m.rogers@rcaol.co.uk) or [tony.slingo@btopenworld.com](mailto:tony.slingo@btopenworld.com)

### **Menevia**

Peter Macpherson. Marriage & Family Life, Curial Offices, 27 Convent St,

Swansea SA1 2BX Email:  
[petermac@familylife.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:petermac@familylife.fsnet.co.uk)

### **Middlesbrough**

Rev John Steel, Bishop's Council for  
Social Concern, 50A The Avenue,  
Linthorpe, Middlesbrough TS5 6QT  
*Also:* Gwen & Peter O'Reilly Email:  
[elyon@supanet.com](mailto:elyon@supanet.com)

### **Northampton**

Fr. Paul Hardy, St. Edward's, Burchard  
Crescent, Shenley Church End, Milton  
Keynes: MK5 6DX. Email:  
[family@dpcnorthampton.org.uk](mailto:family@dpcnorthampton.org.uk)

### **Nottingham**

Deacon Bill Hutchinson, Nottingham  
Diocesan Family & Social Care  
Commission.

### **Plymouth**

Rev. Tony Irwin, c/o Bishop's House, 31  
Wyndham St West,  
Plymouth, Devon, PL1 5RZ

### **Portsmouth**

Patricia Cox, Supporting Family Life  
Initiative, Park Place Pastoral Centre,  
Winchester Road, Wickham, Hants  
PO17 5HA

### **Salford**

Kevin Flanagan, St Antony's Centre,  
Eleventh St, Trafford Park, Manchester,  
M17 1JF Email:  
[familyforum@salforddiocese.org.uk](mailto:familyforum@salforddiocese.org.uk)

### **Shrewsbury**

Clara P. Donnelly, Co-ordinator for  
Marriage & Family Life Ministry.  
Email: [candc.donnelly@btinternet.com](mailto:candc.donnelly@btinternet.com)

### **Southwark**

Fr Graham Preston, The Presbytery,  
208 Sydenham Rd, London, SE26 5SE  
Email: [glPreston@lycos.co.uk](mailto:glPreston@lycos.co.uk)

### **Westminster**

Edmund Adamus, Director of the Dept  
of Pastoral Affairs, Archbishops House,  
Ambrosden Avenue, London SW1P 1QJ  
Email [Edmundadamus@rcdow.org.uk](mailto:Edmundadamus@rcdow.org.uk)

### **Wrexham**

Roberta Canning, Family Life Ministry  
Coordinator, University Catholic  
Chaplaincy, 1 Menai Avenue,  
Bangor LL57 2HH  
Email: [RhosEithin@aol.com](mailto:RhosEithin@aol.com)

Current contact details of diocesan coordinators of marriage and family ministry are usually available in each diocese's Catholic Directory. Otherwise please contact the Marriage & Family Life Project Officer at 39 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1BX or check online at <http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/nav/diocesanmflcoordinators.htm>

## **Appendix 5: Some Family Support Groups & Organisations**

### **Association of Interchurch Families**

The Association of Interchurch Families offers a support network for families where the partners belong to different Christian denominations, particularly marriages between a Roman Catholic and a Christian of another denomination.

Contact: Bastille Court, 2 Paris Garden, London SE1 8ND

Website: [www.interchurchfamilies.org.uk](http://www.interchurchfamilies.org.uk)

Email: [info@interchurchfamilies.org.uk](mailto:info@interchurchfamilies.org.uk)

### **Association of Separated and Divorced Catholics**

The ASDC offers spiritual and practical support through self-help groups; most dioceses have a local coordinator. Services include a starter pack for anyone interested in forming a group, a bi-monthly newsletter New Vision, and a national helpline.

Patron: Rt Rev Terence Brain, Bishop of Salford

Contact: c/o Cathedral House, 250 Chapel St, Salford, M3 5LL

Website: [www.asdcengland.org.uk](http://www.asdcengland.org.uk)

National Helpline: 0113 264 0638

### **Beginning Experience**

Beginning Experience offers weekend residential programmes to those who have lost a partner through death, desertion, separation or divorce, to help them come to terms with their grief so that they can begin again. The weekend is led by trained volunteers who have themselves experienced such a loss and is primarily only for those who are ready to move forward.

UK Contact: Kath Harding. Tel: 01942 246542 Email: [kathharding@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:kathharding@hotmail.co.uk)

BE International Ministry Centre, 1657 Commerce Drive, Ste 2B, South Bend, Indiana 46628-1542, USA

Website: [www.beginningexperience.com](http://www.beginningexperience.com)

### **Bethany Family Institute**

Bethany Family Institute was created to connect those who practise or encourage marriage and family life ministry in the UK & Ireland & elsewhere; to assist clergy, pastoral leaders, educators and catechists to reflect on various ways of serving families more effectively; to offer educational opportunities for leaders in family ministry and spirituality; to identify and describe the spiritual experiences and needs of families; to highlight and create resources for families in supporting their spiritual lives.

Contact: PO Box 2858, Wolverhampton WV3 0BX

Website: [www.bethanyfamilyinstitute.com](http://www.bethanyfamilyinstitute.com)

### **Care For the Family**

Care for the Family aims to promote strong family life and to help those hurting because of family breakdown. They describe the heart of their work as “to come alongside people in the good times and in the tough times - bringing hope, compassion and some practical,

down-to-earth help and encouragement.” Care for the Family produce a wide range of resources, books, packs and newsletters which can be accessed from their website.

Contact: Care for the Family, PO Box 488, Cardiff CF15 7YY

Website: [www.care-for-the-family.org.uk](http://www.care-for-the-family.org.uk)

Tel: (029) 2081 0800 Fax: (029) 2081 4089 Email: [mail@cff.org.uk](mailto:mail@cff.org.uk)

### **Family Caring Trust**

For over a decade, the Trust's resources have been the most popular parenting materials in Britain and Ireland - almost half a million parents have experienced at least one of the courses. Their resources for parents, couples and teenagers include an optional spiritual component and they also offer complete kits and training materials for leaders/facilitators.

Contact: Family Caring, 8 Ashtree Enterprise Park, Newry, Co. Down, BT34 1BY

Website: [www.familycaring.co.uk](http://www.familycaring.co.uk)

Email: [office@familycaring.co.uk](mailto:office@familycaring.co.uk) Tel: 028 3026 4174 Fax: 028 3026 9077

### **Marriage Care**

Marriage Care is a charity operating across England and Wales. Its purpose is to help people prepare for, achieve and sustain successful marriages and to support them should their marriages break down. Marriage Care has a number of centres across England and Wales which offer marriage preparation, counselling and education.

Contact: 1 Blythe Mews, Blythe Road, London W14 0NW

Website: [www.marriagecare.org.uk](http://www.marriagecare.org.uk)

National Helpline: 0845 660 6000 Monday-Friday 10.00 am – 4.00 pm

Tel: 020 7371 1341 Email: [info@marriagecare.org.uk](mailto:info@marriagecare.org.uk)

### **Rainbows for all God's Children**

Rainbows' mission is to provide training and programmes for establishing peer support groups for children, adolescents and adults who are grieving a death, separation, desertion, divorce or other painful loss in their family. These services are offered through accredited sites, usually schools but sometimes other community organisations.

Contact: Rainbows Resource Centre. Unit 7, Hightown Enterprise Park, York St, Luton LU2 0HA Tel: 01582 724106. Fax: 01582 728102

Email: [rainbows.dc@virgin.net](mailto:rainbows.dc@virgin.net)

Website: [www.rainbowsgb.org](http://www.rainbowsgb.org)

### **Teams of Our Lady**

Teams consist of Christian married couples. Members provide support and encouragement for each other on their spiritual journeys and in their daily lives. The team is an extended family; and it is this combination of friendship & support with the spiritual that is at the heart of Teams ethos.

Website: [www.teamsofourlady.org.uk](http://www.teamsofourlady.org.uk)

### **Worldwide Marriage Encounter**

Worldwide Marriage Encounter is a movement within the Catholic Church, which began in the late 1960's, with the intention of giving married couples, priests and religious the

opportunity to take responsibility for what is happening in their lives. Over 5 million couples in almost 100 counties have experienced a weekend. A Marriage Encounter Weekend offers couples the opportunity to refocus on the values that are really important to them and to live more joyful and purposeful lives.

Website: [www.wwme.org.uk](http://www.wwme.org.uk)

## Training & Adult Formation

Training and adult formation in Marriage and Family Life Ministry is available by distance learning at Ushaw College (see [www.ushaw.ac.uk](http://www.ushaw.ac.uk)) near Durham and at Maryvale Institute (see [www.maryvale.ac.uk](http://www.maryvale.ac.uk)) in Birmingham.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Marriage Care</b>  <b>National Helpline 0845 660 6000</b>          (Lines open Mon-Fri 10 am-4pm. Calls charged at local rate)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Association of Separated &amp; Divorced Catholics</b>  <b>National Enquiry Line: 0113 264 0638</b></p>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Catholic Deaf Association</b>          Voice &amp; minicom 0161 834 8828          Textphone 18002 0161 835 1767</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Catholic Blind Services</b>          Tel 0121 441 5577 Fax 0121 441 5599</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Catholic Office for the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (COPCA)</b>          Tel: 0121 233 1963 Fax 0121 236 3379</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Catholic Association for Racial Justice</b>          Tel: 020 8802 8080</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Caritas-Social Action</b>          Tel 020 7901 4875</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>St Vincent de Paul Society</b>          Tel: 020 7935 9126</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Catholic Handicapped Fellowship</b>          Tel: 0191 414 3221</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Fertility UK</b>          Natural family planning &amp; access to local teaching services <a href="http://www.fertilityuk.org">www.fertilityuk.org</a></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Association of Interchurch Families</b>          Tel 020 7654 7251</p>	