

GENERAL SYNOD 2017

Marriage Council Report Proposer: The Revd Jonny Campbell-Smyth

**Embargoed Against Delivery
Check Against Delivery**

Archbishops, Bishops, members of Synod,

In this my first time of proposing a report at General Synod, I am very aware that the background to certain committees and councils, and what they do, may not always be known or assumed to be known by new members. And so I want to begin by answering the question, what does the Marriage Council do? There is no better place to start by listing what the information for the General Synod website says, and I quote: “The Church of Ireland Marriage Council was established by the General Synod in 1996 in consequence of the findings of the Select Committee on Marriage, which was convened in 1991 and reported in 1995. The Council was charged with the introduction of a wide range of services in support of marriage and has worked steadily, not only to introduce these services, but to make them available throughout the Church of Ireland”.

In an ever more demanding world – where the pressures on couples as a result of being able to work from home, to have all the functions of the office available to you day and night, the need to be very disciplined to spend more time with family than a work deadline, the issues of communication where couples spend more time talking to their devices than to each other, where the culture of instant credit can leave inexperienced newly-weds with the tension of debt hanging over them, where the arrival of a first baby either before marriage or early on in marriage can completely wreck any sense of the romance there once was in dating – isn't it really a crucial ministry of our Church to support and help any couple making that step of a long commitment under God to each other? And so whilst the Marriage Council are now 20 years in the journey of supporting, resourcing and enriching couples and family life, we recognise even more today that there is much still that we can do.

In 2015, approximately 22,000 marriages were registered in Republic of Ireland, with 2,500 divorces taking place. In Northern Ireland there were approximately 8,500 marriages

registered, with similarly 2,500 divorces taking place in the same year. In the joy that comes in one big day, the reality of the hard work that must begin is never far away.

When a couple stand in front of me and say to each other: “I will” – that they will be faithful to each other as long as they both live, that they will be with each other for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, I’m guessing that many of them will never be able to understand what that truly means. Twenty years ago I could not have predicted that “in sickness and in health” would be so tested as my wife journeyed the path of cancer. And so it should focus the Church, all of us, to support couples in every way possible, not just in the early years, or in marriage preparation, but also as the years go on. We also need to support couples when children are born. Did you know that 9% of married couples will separate before their child’s fifth birthday? Thirty-five of unmarried couples with young children will separate. The cost of family breakdown in the UK is estimated at £42 billion, and so government are putting a huge incentive into reducing the numbers of family breakdowns.

It is unfortunate when couples separate or divorce, and the statistics for both jurisdictions show that they are not decreasing. And so in supporting them, there will inevitably be support for the wider family which the Church can also help with. Children can be deeply affected by their parents splitting. For example in 2015, in Northern Ireland, 4,200 children were registered as having been affected by divorce. So that is 4,200 lives for 2,500 divorce cases. And that’s why within the role of the Marriage Council, we want to offer whatever assistance and resources to build healthy marriages, loving relationships, strong families, and provide the local church with the resources it needs as it reaches out to couples in their care.

The report on pages 365-367 outlines the work of the Council in this past year. Clergy will be aware that the Council issued a short web-based questionnaire at the beginning of the year so that it would better understand the resources which clergy are currently using around marriage preparation, and also the support which clergy were able to provide to couples going through separation and divorce. It is now intended that the Council will point local parishes to a wide range of materials which they may wish to use to supplement their current materials.

In addition, after successfully running courses in Omagh and Cork entitled, ‘The Pastoral Care of Marriage and Family Life Today’, it is envisaged that this two-day course will be offered to leaders in Dublin in 2018. Our plans for the incoming year will be to host a clergy couples retreat in October for the Diocese of Connor. We have recently been invited to take part in discussions through the Irish Council of Churches on work being done to support

marriage and family. And finally, as the Council is now 20 years old, we believe there is benefit in carrying out a review of where we are and understanding if our scope as a Council continues to reflect the needs of marriage and family life in today's Ireland.

Our thanks go to Revd John Ardis, Chair of the Council, and also to Mrs Sandra Massey who does so much to keep the Council on the right path.

Synod, I am pleased to propose that the Report of the Church of Ireland Marriage Council be received.