

## **Marriage Council Report**

**Proposer: The Revd Jonny Campbell-Smyth**

**Embargo Until Delivery • Check Against Delivery**

Archbishops, Bishops, Members of Synod,

In proposing this year's report of the Marriage Council which can be found on pages 299-301, I want to begin by thanking the members of the Council in how they have worked hard through a period we all will consider as Zoom overload in how we kept pressing on through Covid. It would be very easy to just close the shutters and wait until brighter days would appear, but no, I thank God for the way in which Council members made every effort to meet during the pandemic and wherever possible to make progress in supporting couples and the wider Church across the island around aspects of marriage. I also want to give recognition to the way in which our Council members have personally supported one another. Whilst there is work to be done, it is such a blessed thing when brothers and sisters in Christ lift each other up in what has personally been difficult for all of us. I count the members of the Council as not only co-workers but also as friends. And with that it is sad that due to the natural length of tenure for membership we have said goodbye to the Revd John Ardis, Jennifer O'Regan, and the Revd Canon Lynda Peilow – thank you for the incredible contribution you have made to God's work in the support of marriage in his Church. I also wish to recognise the incredible work and support provided to members of the Council by Ms Aisling Sheridan as Administrative Secretary. Aisling not only diligently supports our Council work but also provides great encouragement to all of us – thank you.

The island as a whole due to Covid has been impacted greatly in the area of relationships. We have all become more used to working at home, seeing family members a lot more than we ever thought. And whilst in many cases this has been positive allowing more time for family unity, it must be recognised that Covid has done its damage on even the strongest of relationships. I read an article from the Irish Times when we were all in the throws of lockdown highlighting how Covid has accentuated issues in relationships that were already strained. In the fourth quarter of 2020 the Irish Republic saw a 30% increase in separation and divorce cases due to the indirect pressures from the pandemic. The article said this, "If there were little cracks in the relationship pre-Covid then living under the microscope, where both parties are living at home, and under each other's feet, 24-seven, and living at home during the home-

schooling months, with children that needed entertaining thrown into the mix, well, a lot of people found themselves living in a cauldron..... There were marriages out there that were struggling anyway, and the difficulties were put under the spotlight because of the conditions we are living in, and people just decided ‘that’s enough’.”

So into this mix, we as a Marriage Council considered how we could proactively help couples, and also prepare the Church once the pandemic would ease. We recognised as a Council that there was much benefit to be gained in relocating the current Marriage Council website onto the main Church of Ireland website. This now can be accessed easily from the front page, but also via [marriage.ireland.anglican.org](http://marriage.ireland.anglican.org). New promotional video material is beginning to take shape so that a wider audience can become more aware of the services that we as a Council offer. The audience pool within social media is quite staggering with almost 400 people following our feeds on Facebook, which we use as a means to provide useful articles and resources to couples.

The Council were keen to provide couples and clergy with an improved list of marriage counsellors across the island, and we are pleased to now have 12 counsellors spanning from Cork to Coleraine and from Galway to Dublin. I would encourage all Synod members to signpost people to these services. We have benefited greatly in the Republic from significant financial support through the Family Support Agency, Tusla. This money can be used to support couples who wish to avail of counselling, but it can also be used by parishes that wish to encourage couples in marriage enrichment. As always with funding, if we do not utilise this money it makes it extremely difficult to justify requests in future years, and therefore I would encourage synod members to contact me about how they can access this funding to support their local context.

In the wake of everyone learning how to use Zoom, the Council partnered with Alpha Ireland in April of this year, hosting an online webinar to educate parishes in using the Alpha Marriage resources. These online products are free of charge and offer parishes everything they need to prepare couples for marriage and also bring married couples together for sessions on enrichment. We have all gained so much understanding of the benefit of online materials, and are now looking at other opportunities into 2022 to bring churches across the island together for webinar events.

It was three years ago that we as a Council met to consider the goals for the next triennial period. At that time we recognised the achievements we had already made. We have come a long way, and believe there is much more for the Council to offer. Therefore it seems appropriate now that we are moving slowly out of the pandemic that we begin, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit to ask God what He desires for his Church to do in supporting marriage. Therefore in November the Council will meet with proposed new membership to consider the way ahead. But the work of Council also invites new ideas. I always value and encourage feedback. Therefore should members of Synod have ideas of how we can help parishes support couples in their community, then please do not hesitate to contact us. We would be more than happy, subject to Covid, to meet and help in any way. Please continue to pray for the important ministry that we offer – whilst we are a Council, we are first and foremost servants of God who desire to see his design for marriages fulfilled and enriched. Within the strain that Covid has clearly brought, pray for couples in your own context who are either preparing for marriage or are married. And most of all pray that God may be in the centre of all relationships – ‘A cord of three strands is not quickly broken’ (Ecclesiastes 4:12)