

General Synod 2022

Marriage Council Report

Proposer: The Revd Jonathan Campbell-Smyth

Check Against Delivery · Embargo Until Delivery

Archbishops, Bishops, Members of Synod,

In an article for the Church of Ireland Gazette in 2021 the Marriage Council highlighted the incredible strain that all of us have felt as a result of the COVID pandemic, and in particular the pressure felt on many marriages and relationships. In May 2021 the Belfast Telegraph, having interviewed Family Lawyers in Northern Ireland described that in this current period, they have experienced the highest volume of queries about relationship break-ups in ‘a long long time’¹. In the Republic of Ireland the Court Services’ Annual Report for year ending 2020 showed a 29% increase in applications for divorce, and a 65% increase in domestic violence applications over the last five years². In my opinion as Chair of the Marriage Council, the support that we as a Church of Ireland can bring to couples considering marriage, those who are married, and to clergy and church leaders supporting couples, this continues to be a vital ministry.

Inevitably with the restrictions in the Council meeting together physically, the Marriage Council has had, like other committees, to become more creative in how it provides support to the wider Church. In partnership with Alpha Ireland, we were able to facilitate an online webinar to showcase the resources available to parishes around marriage preparation. Then most recently, the Council hosted an online 7 week-long marriage enrichment course for clergy and their spouses. Couples from all parts of the island of Ireland across many dioceses were represented. This was a tremendous success and subsequently we have seen rectors adopt the Marriage Course in their local context.

Regarding the support to couples, we now have a resource of 12 professional counsellors and counselling agencies, however we regrettably continue to see a low take-up of these services. The Council is very much dependent on clergy and those who support couples to refer them to these counselling services, and therefore we would encourage all of you to have a look at the contacts we have listed on the marriage section of the Church of Ireland website. We recognise that in the Republic

¹ <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/sharp-rise-in-ni-marriage-splits-during-lockdown-40406681.html>

² <https://www.thejournal.ie/divorce-applications-rose-by-29-last-year-the-highest-increase-since-legislation-was-introduced-5508184-Jul2021>

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of Ireland couples can receive financial support for these counselling services through the grants we have been awarded from TUSLA. If these funds are not fully used, it will become increasingly difficult for the Marriage Council to justify the need.

Now that COVID restrictions have lifted we have many plans for the future of the Marriage Council, and therefore we intend meeting soon for a Vision planning day in which to set out our aims for the next period. We have already agreed to produce a short video introducing our services that each Diocesan Synod can display in the coming year, helping to inform a wider audience of our purpose. Also with the success of the webinar, we feel it is very beneficial to offer more short 1 hour online sessions to resource the wider church in their support of couples. As always, all of our members are available to provide support in your local context, so please do not hesitate to contact the Marriage Council if we can be of further assistance.

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