

Church of Ireland Marriage Council – Report 2008

**CHURCH OF IRELAND MARRIAGE COUNCIL  
REPORT 2008**

**Executive Summary**

The Marriage Council exists to provide a range of services in support of marriage throughout the Church of Ireland. It also considers developments relevant to marriage.

**Core Activities**

The Marriage Council has continued to provide one-to-one couple marriage preparation sessions and marriage counselling in the Republic of Ireland. This provision is generously subsidised by the Family Support Agency. The demand for preparation sessions remains constant but less so for counselling. Enquiries are made through Sandra Massey at + 353 (01) 4125626.

The *Marriage Matters* enrichment programme continues to be offered. An initiative to promote this programme, in co-operation with the Mother's Union, has begun.

The Marriage Council website continues to be a useful communications tool and enquiry resource, especially for overseas interest. The website address is [www.marriagematters.anglican.org](http://www.marriagematters.anglican.org)

**Additional Activities 2007-2008**

A major survey of all Church of Ireland clergy and their spouses, relating to clerical family life, was undertaken. 1200 questionnaires were sent and over 800 returned.

A presentation by the Council to the House of Bishops (respecting the confidentiality of the survey) on the response to the survey was made in January 2008. Other responses are being discussed and planned.

An application has been made to the Priorities Fund to promote and run a *Contemporary Couples* programme aimed at parishes in Northern Ireland.

A one-day marriage preparation course for those marrying for a second time was initiated in partnership with the Diocese of Down and Dromore.

A response was made to proposed text for a forthcoming APCK information leaflet on marriage.

Contracted professionals who provide marriage preparation/marriage counselling now meet regularly to discuss progress and promote programmes.

**Clergy /Clergy Spouse Questionnaire**

Without question the major activity in the year has been initiating, managing and processing the questionnaire sent to all serving clergy and separately to their spouses. The questionnaire

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elicited a very significant response and although not scientific in nature, it provided a useful snapshot of the attitude of clergy and their spouses to marital joys/difficulties as experienced in early twenty-first century Ireland.

The responses drew our attention to the substantial strains which modern clerical life places on families. They also suggested that the Church of Ireland has an uneven record of how it responds to these difficulties.

Although the survey was anonymous, the responses were given in confidence and therefore it is not possible to go into a great deal of detail about them. Indeed confidentiality (or the lack of it) regarding personal matters in the Church of Ireland was a prominent theme in the responses. However some respondents expressed a lack of confidence in the traditional means of pastoral care of clergy.

The response to the question “How do you rate the pastoral care/support offered to you and your spouse by the Church of Ireland?” was of interest. In quite similar responses from clergy and spouses, 40% rated pastoral care as falling within the very good bracket but, significantly, 55% rated pastoral care within the fair and poor category.

This response, taken together with the replies to other questions and the many comments volunteered by respondents, suggests that structures to support clerical family life, within the Church of Ireland, are not adequate for modern ministry.

Indeed some respondents went so far as to say that they felt that Christian family life and Christian ministerial life had become incompatible.

This observation is not solely to do with the tied house system (although that is an important element in it), but with a wide range of unique difficulties experienced by clergy families.

The survey response does not call into question the traditional role of the bishop as *pastor paritorum* but it undoubtedly high-lights a clearly articulated problem where the bishop has both a disciplinary and a pastoral role. It gives rise also to a number of questions about who could best give pastoral/personnel support to clergy families and ( given frequently expressed concerns about confidentiality) how this provision would relate to the current system.

The Marriage Council would welcome a candid debate on these issues.

The Council is in the process of considering how best it might respond in other practical ways to the data collected through the questionnaire.

### **Provision of Core Activities**

The work of marriage preparation sessions and marriage guidance continues to be concentrated in the Republic of Ireland where government subsidy makes it feasible. The funding structure in Northern Ireland differs greatly and application would have to be made annually to individual Trusts for very small sums of money.

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For this reason the Council has made application to the Priorities Fund to promote, organize and run a programme called *Contemporary Couples*. The programme has been designed and will be delivered by a professional marriage counsellor and will be aimed at providing stimulating and up-to-date information and expertise to clergy in the general area of relationships.

#### **Marriage Law**

Marriage Law in the Republic of Ireland changed in 2007 with major administrative shifts from the Church to Local government. A useful guide to new procedures for registering marriage in both civil and religious contexts has been published by the Office of the Registrar General in the Republic of Ireland and has been distributed to all clergy.

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