

GENERAL SYNOD 2008

THE REPORT OF THE MARRIAGE COUNCIL

Proposed by Revd John McDowell (Diocese of Down)

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Your Grace, members of Synod, this has been the third year running that it has been my privilege to propose the Report of the Church of Ireland Marriage Council at General Synod. That is not because I am especially good at the task, but because there are relatively few of our membership who are also members of Synod. We are, by and large, ordinary members (clerical and lay) of the Church of Ireland, with a deep commitment to our Church and to the challenges of married life. As the Mother's Union Prayer so aptly says "a source of blessing.... with all its joys and sorrows".

As Chairman of the Council I would like to pay tribute to the conscientiousness and general sanity of my colleagues who have provided support, energy and wisdom on the many issues which we have dealt with in the past year. And a particular thank you to Mrs Sandra Massey of Church House, who is our Hon. Treasurer and general help-meet and who has more patience than we should expect, even from a saint of her standing.

Not that everything has gone according to our plans and hopes. In the Republic of Ireland we receive grant aid from the Family Support Agency to provide professional

Marriage Preparation and Marriage Counseling to Church of Ireland couples. However in Northern Ireland such funding is either not available to us or would be counter-productively difficult to access. We had hoped that the Priorities Fund might be in a position to help us run a programme entitled “Contemporary Couples” to refresh clergy on up-to-date research and techniques in relation the modern marriages. Unfortunately we were unsuccessful in our application. Perhaps better luck next time.

However that has not prevented us from trying to make a positive contribution using what resources we can access. In partnership with the Diocese of Down and Dromore we have introduced a one-day programme designed to address the particular issues surrounding second marriages, following divorce and we are of course willing to extend that elsewhere or to discuss what we and our contracted professional staff might be able to provide where the need arises.

You will see that this year we have a Marriage Council stand just outside the room and you will be most welcome to browse there and to chat to members of the Council who are in attendance. You will find on the stand some information about our work and also these little “handy cards” designed for clergy. They have on them useful contacts and telephone numbers of agencies which may be of help in pastoral work. Please take one.

One initiative which did meet with a very positive response was our questionnaire to all clergy and clergy spouses in which we tried to get a snapshot of the of clergy family life and its particular characteristics. Living in a rectory or a curatage is a unique kind of

experience and provides unique joys and tribulations.

I have to say that we were staggered at the sheer size of the response- around 800 replies, or about 66% of those written to. It has taken us quite some time to digest even a portion of the results and we have provided a summary of the figures and a brief commentary in this little A5 handout which can be picked up at the Marriage Council stand.

As you would expect, the responses were very wide ranging and we have given only one sample response to one question in our actual Report on page 332 of the Book of Reports. The responses to the questionnaire did not suggest that there was any sort of general crisis of morale amongst clergy and their spouses. By and large clergy and clergy spouses go about their daily work and daily lives deeply grateful for their calling and living with the peculiar difficulties which it involves.

However we would not be keeping faith with our respondents if we did not also point to some tensions. We do this, not to make exaggerated comments or to overstate the case, but to invite this House to consider what we have found and to elicit your comments and suggestions. A small part-time committee like our own cannot possibly have all the answers and it is in that spirit that we wished to stimulate this debate.

A fair number of our respondents suggested that they would be uncomfortable sharing their problems with those in "the system". These need not be specifically family problems, but they may have an impact on family life. Some of these are related to the

tied-house system but many are not.

Clergy, by and large, have the highest regard for their bishops and for the particular difficulties of Episcopal office and are keenly aware of the quandary which bishops may find themselves in as they try to act as both pastors and sources of discipline. Indeed it may be for this very reason that clergy and their spouses feel a little ambivalent about an early approach to those set in authority over them. It can also seem like an admission of failure on their part when in fact it is simply part of the normal cycle of clerical life.

It would be most helpful to the Marriage Council in its future work to hear from Synod on these matters. Although clergy have particular challenges in married and family life, married life is challenging for all in modern Ireland. Pressures of work, pressures on finance, insecurity, commuting pressures, the housing market, the difficulties of too many schools in some places and too few in others. No doubt there is within this hall a wealth of experience from which we could learn and within the wider Church individuals and agencies that can assist. We look forward to your contribution.

As I said a little earlier, it would be easy to exaggerate and to overstate the case. No doubt for the most part clergy marriages run as smoothly as family life in general can be expected to run in the modern world. Regardless of the difficulties clergy would not do any other job. But there may be ways in which we as a church can be responsive to their needs and it is on this positive aspect that we wish to concentrate our efforts.

It gives me great pleasure to propose that the Report of the Marriage Council be received and that Synod approves the names on your Agenda papers of those nominated to serve for the incoming term.