

GENERAL SYNOD 2008

CHURCH OF IRELAND MARRIAGE COUNCIL

Seconded by Revd Canon Jonathan Barry (Diocese of Down)

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Your Grace, members of Synod, it gives me great pleasure to second the Report of the Church of Ireland Marriage Council at General Synod, not least because I have not been a member of the General Synod for the last five years. I have therefore been unable to participate in any of the marriage discussions within the General Synod itself. Approaching the end of my service on the Marriage Council, I find that my contribution today comes at a time which I regard as crucial for the future of our Church, our understanding of Christian marriage, and the family life of the clergy.

But first, while I wish very much to pay tribute to Sandra Massey, and also to our chairman, I do want to express gratitude to the Council members from all over Ireland, who seek to do what they can to influence society and bring a Christian perspective to bear on marriage and the family. And I do thank those whose time of service began before I arrived, and obviously ended before I depart. The Marriage Council is a good Committee and is being used, I venture to suggest, by the Holy Spirit at this time.

Let me explain.

Within the context of my pastoral experience in the Diocese of Down in 30 years, we have moved from having a relatively few children from broken homes in our schools, to having many classes in Primary School where a sizeable number of

children in a class live in new arrangements, in second families. Often school is a very real source of stability and love in their lives. It may well be the teacher who is aware of a child apprehensive on a Friday, because this is the weekend Mummy's new boyfriend comes to stay, and the child dislikes him, and fears him when he is drunk. And then there is the following weekend, when the child must leave the familiar home, to cope with Daddy's new partner, and perhaps a new step-family.

A broken family usually is what it says on the tin. It is broken. There are too many children in contemporary Irish society who are psychologically broken, alone, somewhat apprehensive, vulnerable, enduring their own private, often unspoken sense of despair. There can be resurrection moments of great happiness and hope. But too often the appropriate imagery is one of emotional crucifixion.

Teachers are in the front line, coping with these vulnerable children, offering a source of comfort and a sense of love that is thoroughly spiritual. I venture to suggest that, as a Church, we must begin to seek to understand what we should be saying on Christian marriage in this world, and we should be prioritizing the training of clergy in counseling skills, in the pastoral care of families and that we start the teaching of children about relationships, perhaps before confirmation age. Tentative steps are being considered in education. I suggest we should be linking into this process, not just in order to know what is happening elsewhere, but in order to seek to influence it for good.

I hope the new Theological Institute will avail of the Marriage Council and others in the Church with expertise in marriage, to assist with the drawing up of courses and even, indeed, to make a direct contribution to the training of clergy. My personal belief is that the future of Christianity in this island may well depend on what happens to the family. In this context, I do hope the Marriage Council will continue and will also seek to draw in a contribution from the wider Church.

Secondly I commend the Marriage Council's website to Synod. The internet is the contemporary way of people being able to access information from the sanctity of their homes. The website is now receiving approximately 400 genuine hits a month. A *month!* I think that is extraordinary. I pay tribute to Annette McGrath, our webmistress. When I first joined the Marriage Council, I was asked to undertake a revision of our website. I rapidly concluded it could not be done by me, an amateur, but that it must be done professionally. And it is indeed being very professionally looked after. But I do suggest all our Church's official Committees should have their websites done in-house. This would ensure a Church of Ireland style. I believe that would make things even more professional. Be that as it may, the Marriage Council website is a most useful resource for those exploring, or seeking information. It is being widely used. So we thank Annette for a huge amount of work that is really worthwhile.

Thirdly, I refer to our Questionnaire. It is fair to say that while the results may surprise, they are surely not unexpected. In 1981 I was Secretary of the Commission on Ministry reporting to the General Synod. Had we been told then that the problems we foresaw in relation to the clergy, their training and the looming problem of the tied house would remain unidentified and ignored to reappear in 2008, we would have been *horrified*.

I am indeed horrified, that problems clearly visible in the first decade of my ministry should have been pushed - so to speak - under the carpet, where they trip us up again in my last decade. Our Chairman has been fair in his speech. We do not wish to exaggerate. Overstating a case can diminish. But the tied house does pose an inherent problem for clergy and their families. I do feel this is becoming an issue that will have to be dealt with. Indeed, the wife of the Archbishop of Dublin - no less! - knows it must be dealt with and has said so. Mrs Neill is

correct. Modestly, I have to say I think I know how the problem can be satisfactorily resolved. If anyone wishes to speak to me afterwards, I would be delighted!

Our Chairman has pointed out the tension inherent in the Bishop's role, the quandary in which bishops may find themselves as they try to act as both pastors and sources of discipline. Perhaps of greater significance than discipline is the Bishop's role in the promotion of the clergy, and also in their disappointment. Nothing seems straight-forward nowadays, and it should not surprise that our modest questionnaire reveals an entire area of our Church's life that requires loving, sensitive and prayerful attention.

Your Grace, it gives me great pleasure to second the report of the Church of Ireland Marriage Council.