

Church of Ireland Marriage Council – Report 2009
CHURCH OF IRELAND MARRIAGE COUNCIL

REPORT 2009

MEMBERSHIP

Appointed by the House of Bishops

Rt Rev RCA Henderson, Bishop of Tuam

Elected by General Synod

Mrs J Bunting

Mrs H Caird

Mrs D Cromeey

Mrs G Good

Rev BJ Harper

Rev BJ Hayes

Rev FJ McDowell (Chair)

Rev MEE McElhinney

Mrs L Sandes

Mrs O Thorpe (Honorary Secretary)

In attendance

Mrs S Massey

Consultants:

Mrs C Missen and Mrs A McGrath

Executive Summary

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

As a follow-up to last year's General Synod debate on the preliminary findings of the clergy and clergy spouses questionnaire the Council wrote to the Honorary Secretaries suggesting that a Church-wide working group be established to examine the whole issue of tied housing.

As a result Standing Committee is in the process of appointing such a group, which will include a Marriage Council nominee.

On the basis of the questionnaire, the Marriage Council has also organised and facilitated a number of focus groups for clergy and clergy spouses in a range of dioceses. These are intended to draw out more specific issues relating to clergy marriage and family life which might need to be addressed.

The Abstract of the results of the Questionnaire published at last year's General Synod has attracted some academic interest.

As a result of a successful application to the Priorities Fund a clergy training programme *Contemporary Couples* designed and run by the Marriage Council will be launched in Northern Ireland.

The Marriage Council continues to offer Marriage Preparation, Marriage Counselling and Marriage Enrichment advice and programmes, generously funded by the Family Support Agency in the Republic of Ireland.

Church of Ireland Marriage Council – Report 2009

Our website www.marriagematters.ireland.anglican.org receives on average around 500 genuine hits per month. The website is also a means whereby we respond to queries regarding marriage in the Church of Ireland.

A valued member of the Council, Mrs Glynis Good, published a book *When Parents Split* dealing with the enormous difficulties surrounding the impact of marriage breakdown on young people. Although this was not a Marriage Council publication, it is important to highlight the degree of expertise available to the Church.

Preparation, Counselling, Enrichment

The Council retains the services of marriage counsellors who offer;

- One counsellor to one couple marriage preparation (pioneered in Ireland by the Council), subsidised in the Republic of Ireland;
- A full range of counselling for married couples, subsidised in the Republic of Ireland;
- Advice, presentations and programme specially designed for couples entering second marriages;
- Marriage Enrichment Programmes this year specifically targeted towards Mother's Union Groups.

Relationship counselling and marriage preparation have a steady uptake throughout the year. Presentations relating to marriage enrichment have picked up in 2008-09 and other advice or presentations e.g. to rural deaneries or individuals is provided *ad hoc*.

Contemporary Couples

As this report is being prepared for General Synod we have just received news that the Priorities Fund will provide finance for a programme designed to be delivered to groups of clergy in Northern Ireland and highlighting contemporary issues for married people.

This funding should enable the Council to help redress the balance in its provision in Northern Ireland, where it has not been possible to source public funding to match that provided by the Family Support Agency in the Republic of Ireland.

Focus Groups

As a result of the level of response and concern raised by the remarkable feedback we received from our clergy and clergy spouse questionnaire, the Council has organised a number of focus groups around Ireland to probe a little deeper into the joys and concerns of clerical family life.

Although these were groups whose details remain confidential to the Council, we would wish to express our thanks to the relevant Bishops for giving permission to run the groups in their dioceses.

The groups have met in the dioceses of Down and Dromore, Connor, and Cork, Cloyne and Ross. It is planned to convene two further groups in Dublin and probably in Cashel.

The groups were facilitated by Marriage Council members or retained professionals and addressed a common set of issues worked out within the Council.

Church of Ireland Marriage Council – Report 2009

As a small Council of largely volunteer members the planning, preparation and servicing of this exercise has been a major element in our work for this year, and the results of the exercise are reflected in the motion presented at the conclusion of this report.

Also, it cannot be stressed strongly enough that the vast majority of input from both the questionnaire and the focus groups was extremely positive. Clergy and clergy spouses are very aware of the tremendous privileges of ministry to the people of God and of the esteem in which they are often held in parishes. They do not seek material unfair advantages, but have suggested some measures of good practice which might be considered in a Church of the 21st Century.

Similarly, the good practice suggestions are not intended in any way to undermine the traditional role of the ordinary as *pastor paritorum*, but where possible, and with a Bishop's permission, to supplement that role in support of this key human resource in the ministry.

One of the glories of the Church of Ireland (and of Anglicanism in general) is its diversity and range of local colour. However, that can have a negative side also, where areas of responsibility are vague and where diocesan and parochial autonomy can lead to isolation. In the case of clergy and their spouses tensions at work will often affect family life to an inordinate degree.

Perhaps there is nothing more helpful to any profession than a high degree of clarity about working practices and objectives. These are very difficult to define in any but the most general way in vastly varying parochial situations. In such an environment some clarity about support structures becomes immensely valuable.

This is particularly the case in the Church of Ireland where we have no professional central, diocesan, or parochial human resources facility.

To help move towards these aims we would wish to commend the following best practice suggestions to General Synod:

- As in the Methodist Church, two fixed weekends per annum to be identified where cover is provided, as a matter of course. Clergy as in the past to organise their own cover for summer holidays;
- A clear set of guidelines issued to parishes (not just Select Vestries) about the duties and expectations of parish clergy;
- At the very outset of ministerial formation, that proper pastoral care be given in the shape of access to independent relationship counsellors and adequate provision for spouses and children to live with ordinands, where that is desired;
- That it be made clear that in most circumstances there should be no clash of priorities between the vocation of orders and the vocation of marriage;
- A fresh look at the funding and purpose of sabbaticals on a Church-wide basis, incorporating regular revision;
- That clergy are provided with suitable time-management training at regular intervals;
- That dioceses have in place structured ways to prevent undue clergy isolation.

Motion

That the General Synod takes seriously the impact of ministry on clergy marriages and family life and encourages the Marriage Council to develop methods of support.

Church of Ireland Marriage Council – Report 2009