

## Marriage Council Report

**Proposer: The Revd Jonny Campbell-Smyth**

Archbishops, Bishops, members of Synod,

In 2016 I was appointed to sit on the Marriage Council. As a husband who dearly loves his wife now of 22 married years, and a wife who is very patient and long suffering of her husband of 22 years, I consider it a privilege to share and encourage with couples that come to me yearly seeking to join together through marriage in the presence of God within his Church. I am regularly reminded that I am still learning how to be a better and more understanding husband, and therefore the support and enrichment of marriage is an ongoing process that requires deep commitment of any couple.

The deep passion within my heart to provide support and pastoring to couples, but also to encourage and resource clergy in their important role, has landed me this year into the role as Chair of the Marriage Council. And whilst the Council has been in existence since 1996, the task ahead of it I believe becomes ever more important. Recent statistics from the EU<sup>1</sup> show that in the period from 1965 to 2015 (a period of half a century) the rate of people getting married in the UK has reduced by 41%, and thankfully only reduced by 12% in Ireland. The rate of divorce in the same 50 year period within the UK has increased by 70%, but Ireland has remained reasonably static year on year. The most startling statistic that I have seen recently comes from the Office for National Statistics in the UK showing that in 2017<sup>2</sup> 42% of marriages in England and Wales ended in divorce, and whilst this is out of our jurisdiction, it gives an unhealthy picture into the future. We also recognise today that new patterns of family formation have dramatically increased the number of children that are born to couples that are not married. For example in Ireland in 1980 European statistics showed that 6 out of every 1000 births were outside of marriage, whereas in 2015 this had increased to 36 out of every 1000 births, and similarly in the UK this had increased from 11 in 1980 to 48 in every 1000 births occurring outside of marriage.

Therefore this very much prompts a call on the Church to refocus its support and mission for a culture that is changing dramatically, and where the biblical values which we hold on to from Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19 are in jeopardy of being lost in a society that considers these to be outdated. I have said in previous years to Synod that the impact of marriage break-up has a dramatic impact on children, and therefore as chair of this Council I feel we could benefit greatly in working closely with other committees to ensure children of divorced couples or those witnessing frightening disruption within the family home are supported properly by the Church. I am an example of a child brought up in a broken home, but the support and love that was given to me by the Church ensured that I found God in the brokenness.

It is therefore encouraging to know that in the midst of challenging times for our churches, that we still through the Council are considering ways of providing support to couples who come to us considering marriage, enriching those already in marriage, and the clergy who support them. In this past year we have gone through something of a review, and having taken benefit from Lydia Monds facilitating sessions, it has allowed us as a Council to have a clearer focus for the future. I also feel that now having a consistent presence from the House of Bishops, through Bishop Pat Storey, that this has encouraged a recommitment of all Council members and recently appointed new members to the values originally set out as a Council.

Whilst we are still challenged as a Council, like other committees, to find the time to implement new training events or resources to help both lay and clergy, we now feel confident following our review that we have a clear plan ahead. And these will centre around three specific strands:

Firstly, Communication. We recognise that we need to make ourselves more accessible and visible across the Church, and we are considering ways of lifting the profile of what we do each year into

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<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Marriage\\_and\\_divorce\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Marriage_and_divorce_statistics)

<sup>2</sup> [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/divorce/bulletins/divorcesinenglandandwales/2017](http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/divorce/bulletins/divorcesinenglandandwales/2017)

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every church across the island – this may be through training events, awareness at Diocesan Synods, improved material, and potentially a Sunday that focuses on relationships and marriage.

Secondly, counselling marriage enrichment and marriage crisis. As a Council we have a number of counsellors available to the wider church to support people going through difficult circumstances, and yet these services are limited in some parts of the island, and in others are not utilised enough. Again this may be down to the need for more effective communication. So as a Council we want to address this to make this a helpful resource for clergy to avail of.

Thirdly, after a 2007 survey of spouses of clergy, the overwhelming issue that was raised at that time was a greater need to spend time with their husband or wife in order to reconnect in the busyness of church life. We have as a council tried to maintain the support around this area through getaways, but we recognise that through recent examples of poor attendance, we must revisit this to be of greater support to couples in ministry.

In addition to these plans, we as always welcome requests for support from Dioceses or local churches that may benefit from resources or training to help them in supporting and enriching others in marriage.

As a final remark on the report, I would ask Synod to consider the action placed upon the Council at last year's Synod regarding Solemnisation of Marriages outside of church buildings. We discussed the issue at length, and reached a decision that as it represents a significant change in the current practice of the Church of Ireland, and as it could be seen by those inside and outside to be the Church changing what it says about marriage and its solemnisation, that it is beyond the remit of the Council. Our remit is to resource the Church as it supports marriage and family life, supporting those getting married, caring for married couples, those in difficult situations, and supporting clergy in their role. We therefore communicated earlier this year to the Honorary Secretaries, with specific points that are worth more discussion.

As Chair I would like to thank all members of the Council for their support to me as I take on this new role, and my thanks to the previous chair, the Revd John Ardis, in his friendship and encouragement to me through this transition.

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