

## **Marriage Council Report**

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

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Archbishops, Bishops, Members of General Synod,

I'm conscious that this may be a first General Synod for some of you at the beginning of a new triennium, and so I believe it is important to summarise the important role that the Marriage Council has to the wider Church.

The Marriage Council was established almost 30 years ago with the aim to provide support to couples considering marriage, to church leaders as they guide couples through preparation for marriage and into their married life together. And it is also there to signpost couples who may need support in their relationship through counselling services. It is therefore a real privilege in knowing that we as a Council continue to enrich marriages throughout Ireland.

Canon 31 of the Church affirms, according to our Lord's teaching that marriage is in its purpose a union permanent and life-long, for better or worse, till death do them part, of one man with one woman, to the exclusion of all others on either side, for the procreation and nurture of children, for the hallowing and right direction of the natural instincts and affections, and for the mutual society, help and comfort which the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.

So wherever possible, we as a Church, and we as a Council, must do whatever we can to support couples pastorally who either under God, or with no previous involvement of the Church have entered into this covenantal relationship. We must reach out to ensure marriage as God designed it continues to be an important foundation of society, and an expression of the unity in love as Christ is united to his Church.

So here is the reality – since official data was available across Europe from 1964, the number of marriages per year up to 2022 has declined across Europe by almost 50%, and in the very same period, the divorce rate has doubled, although in recent years the numbers have declined slightly<sup>1</sup>. More locally, in 1964 the number of couples married in Church of Ireland parishes in Northern Ireland was 2,343 and in 2022 that has reduced to 511, making that a 78% reduction of those marrying in our churches in the past 60 years. The Central Statistics Office for the Republic of Ireland shows that only 1.1% of marriages (that's 242) in the Republic took place

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Marriage and divorce statistics recorded by Eurostat: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Marriage\\_and\\_divorce\\_statistics#Fewer\\_marriages.2C\\_fewer\\_divorces](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Marriage_and_divorce_statistics#Fewer_marriages.2C_fewer_divorces)

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in the Church of Ireland within 2023. Civil ceremonies however increased to 31.6% of all marriages in 2023.

So statistically there is a growing tide of couples moving away from church weddings across the island, but that doesn't imply that our role is diminishing. The Church has a lot to offer to support couples in their relationships. The Church can be an incredible place of hope, a place of encouragement, a place that models love, a place of refuge, and a place of welcome. We don't know when couples will need us, but I believe the Church has the opportunity to provide support at any stage, whether when a couple are considering marriage, supporting couples through the challenges of life – whether health, loss, divorce, remarriage, the empty nest, whatever it is, the Church is there to support – and this is where we as a Marriage Council I think have begun this year to spread our wings wider.

You will see from the report on pages 273 and 274, that our core functions have not changed. In this past year we have endeavoured to attend as many Diocesan Synods to communicate the work we do. We have also led Marriage Enrichment courses for parishes that have reached out to us. In terms of supporting couples, we are blessed to have relationship counsellors across the island. Through the assistance of external funding, we are now able to finance a couple's first six sessions with a counsellor (and that may not be for issues within their marriage – it simply may be for preparation for marriage), and yet it is disappointing that our counselling services are not utilised enough by parishes. So please know today that our external funding is an incredible opportunity to provide churches to provide support to couples. But we are dependent on clergy and others to sign-post people to our services – so we encourage you to get in touch.

Looking into the year ahead, and recognising the need to enrich clergy and their spouses in **their** relationships, we are delighted today to announce that a retreat for clergy and their spouses will be provided in late October at the Hudson Bay Hotel, Athlone, for a time of refreshment and relaxation, with Bishop Ken Good and his wife Mary facilitating the retreat.

I talked about spreading our wings wider, so on 10th June we are inviting Church Leaders across Ireland to join together for a short one-hour lunchtime webinar to resource them when dealing with people who are coming to terms with the death of their spouse. We will be joined

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online by a panel of experts who will be able to talk directly into this important pastoral issue, and also provide useful resources to leaders who will walk with families in these circumstances.

We have listened to feedback from a number of you, and so in response we also intend running similar short online webinars on other topics including blended families and remarriage, and supporting people through divorce and separation. All these are real issues which we believe as a Marriage Council, God wants to speak into.

In addition, we have valued the growing relationships with the Mothers' Union and look forward to ways in which we can partner on topics concerning the family unit.

Finally, this has been a year of change within the makeup of the Council. We have said goodbye to Mrs Dianne Morris who has been a source of incredible wisdom to the Council through her skills as a relationship counsellor. The Rev Canon Nicola Halford and Rev James Boyd have also had to step down from their positions. I would therefore like to thank all of them, and the support of the current makeup of the Council – we have prayerfully and diligently worked together through a number of initiatives, and their contribution to the Council is certainly not taken from granted. Now at the beginning of this new term as a Synod a number of new members are being proposed for the period 2024-2026. Having served now in my role as Chair for possibly longer than I was meant to, I too will now be moving aside, but it is encouraging to see the future opportunities that the Marriage Council has to shape the lives of many marriages across Ireland. Whilst the pattern for relationships is definitely changing, I am assured of the foundation that comes when we as a Church guide and support couples placing God firmly at the centre of their marriages. Remembering those words of Ecclesiastes 4:12 “a cord of three strands cannot be easily broken”.

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