

CHURCH OF IRELAND MARRIAGE COUNCIL

REPORT 2001

MEMBERSHIP

Appointed by the House of Bishops

Rt Rev RCA Henderson, Bishop of Tuam

Elected by General Synod

Rev Prof RAB Mollan (Chairman)
 Rev Canon KA Kearon
 Rev ECJ Woods (Honorary Secretary)
 Mrs J Denner
 Mrs I Deverell
 Mrs R Macartney
 Mrs C Missen
 Mr I Slaine
 Mrs M Stephens
 Mrs P Totten
 Mrs J Turner
 Mrs P Wallace

Co-opted

Rev Canon PR Draper
 Mr G Clark
 Mr G Glenn

“MARRIAGE TODAY – A CHRISTIAN EXPLORATION”

This was the title of a major conference in November 2000 organised and hosted by the Marriage Council. The keynote addresses were as follows: *The Theology of Marriage* by the Rt Rev Richard Henderson, *The History of Marriage* by the Most Rev Richard Clarke and *The Ideal and Reality of Marriage Today* by Ms Claire Missen of the Marriage and Relationship Counselling Service.

The Theology of Marriage

Bishop Henderson based his address on the concept of God as Trinity – “a loving and equal partnership as marriage should be”. The Trinity is a holy relationship of love joined together by consent, commitment and love, and in the challenge of a loving and committed relationship with each other God is calling us into sharing something of himself. “It follows that we shall indeed find God in good relationships”.

The Trinity is also creative. “We are invited to make something of life, to make something with life, even to make life”. Not all creativity is pro-creativity. “Certainly

human marriage carries creation within it; sometimes this is through what we call pro-creation. But other times, marriages and indeed friendships are deeply creative without creating humankind”.

The History of Marriage

Bishop Clarke observed that we have a happy knack of assuming that the past was both standardised and consistent but “Nothing could be further from the truth, particularly when it comes to marriage”.

Going back to the early history of the church, he noted that Christians were married according to the ceremonies and popular customs associated with marriage in contemporary society, although the Church did seek to encircle the marriages of her members with pastoral care. But the aim was not to create a separate marriage procedure for Christians. Marriage “in the presence of the church” was just not known in the early centuries. It was probably only in the eleventh or twelfth centuries that the church began to take any real jurisdictional control over marriage.

It was not until the sixteenth century that the Council of Trent decreed that marriages should be celebrated in the presence of a priest and at least two witnesses in order to be considered canonically valid. Up to that there was no uniformity throughout Christendom – the essential element was consent. The due performance of public ceremonies was secondary.

In the post-Reformation period, the marriage ceremony and the church’s requirements did not change. “However, the Church was still willing to recognise informal marriages whereby the parties simply exchanged promises to one another that they would live as man and wife. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, these informal marriages were recognised by the ecclesiastical authority”.

Bishop Clarke noted “that even where a couple were in good standing with the church and were doing everything correctly, the public church ceremony was very much something tacked on to the end of much family and social ritual, private and public ... Consent, given freely and properly witnessed, is what makes a valid marriage”.

Today in Ireland we operate under a Marriage Act 1844, which allows the Church of Ireland, among other churches and institutions, to officiate at marriages that the State is prepared to recognise as true marriages. “Perhaps it is because Church and State have combined to operate a system which is apparently *seamless* between the civil and ecclesiastical aspects of marriage, that the belief has built up steadily through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century that a church marriage was the only real marriage in the sight of God. The belief of the Christian Church through well over half of its existence has been otherwise”.

The Ideal and Reality of Marriage Today

In her address Ms Missen said that Marriage had changed, but in her view it was for the better, both for men and for women. She defined a happy marriage, as “quite simply being respected and cherished”, and went on to say that in a modern marriage couples see

themselves as equal partners where neither holds the greater power. Mutuality is the key word, and the key to being respected and cherished.

She firmly believed that, in spite of what many people think, couples today do have a sense of commitment, and do make every effort to save the relationship. True, many more marriages are breaking down, but in her opinion, only a tiny minority on their wedding day feel they are not making a commitment. But because of the pressures of life today marriages are under stress and breaking down. Often at the end of a day, after coping with work, traffic, children, homework and housework, couples have little energy left for maintaining their relationship.

Turning to communication, Ms Missen spoke about gender difference and the impact it can have on a relationship. “Women talk to think, men think to talk”. Each gender needs to learn to appreciate the difference in their ways of communicating feelings, so that neither is left feeling powerless.

Ms Missen concluded that, in her experience, couples today are much more clear in their minds about the whole concept of equal partnership and this makes her optimistic even though marriage may be going through an unstable period.

The keynote addresses were followed by workshops on Cohabitation, Interchurch Marriage, Marriage Nurture, Separation and Breakdown and Second Relationships.

A full report of the keynote addresses and the results of the workshops can be consulted in the RCB Library.

INTERCHURCH MARRIAGE

A document explaining the current rules and practices relating to Interchurch marriage was drafted by the Marriage Council and sent to the House of Bishops for ratification. This was sent to all clergy in June 2000 as an appendix to their marriage preparation pack “Towards Marriage”. The document is intended for photocopying to give to couples contemplating an interchurch marriage.

WEBSITE

The Council launched its own website in February 2001 in conjunction with the Church of Ireland website. The address of the website is <http://marriagecouncil.ireland.anglican.org/>. The Council would like to thank Ian Mollan and Alan Walbridge for all their hard work in preparing the site and maintaining it.

NATIONAL MARRIAGE WEEK 11 - 18 FEBRUARY 2001

The Council compiled a prayer diary for use by church members during the week. This was distributed to all diocesan magazines and through the Church of Ireland Forum.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON LAW REFORM

The Council chairman, Rev Prof RAB Mollan was a member of the Standing Committee group which considered the report of the Advisory Committee on Law Reform (NI). The Church of Ireland welcomed the proposals as a way forward and urged the Advisory Committee of the need for an all-Ireland commonality.

FUTURE PLANS

1. One of the main results of a questionnaire sent to all clergy in 2000 was a request for training in counselling to enhance their pastoral skills in dealing with marriage preparation and marriage breakdown. The Council felt that diocesan bishops would best provide this as part of their programmes of continuing on-going ministerial training and the Council wrote to each bishop in this regard.

As a follow-up to that, the Council is considering setting up the programme and personnel that could provide a training day for any diocese which would want to give such in-service training to their clergy.

2. Many issues were highlighted at last year's conference, and the council plan to hold another conference to focus on the whole issue of Second Relationships, including the effects of marriage breakdown on children.

THANKS

The Council would like to express its gratitude to Ms Jennifer Byrne of Church House for the many ways she serves the Council as administrative assistant and for her unfailing efficiency, patience and good humour.