

Report of the Church of Ireland Marriage Council

Proposed by PADDY WALLACECONNOR DIOCESE

Embargoed until Delivery

In proposing this report to Synod I would like to draw your attention to the Marriage Council's endeavours to provide practical support for couples who are trying to make the best of committed relationships in a world of much stress and impermanence.

However prior to elaborating on that support I want to comment on the reference in the report to our Strategy Day. I wonder how often in this' time-driven and meeting packed' world do we in our various church committees and councils take time to pause, to reflect on what has been done and to ponder and debate what our priorities should be for the immediate future? The Strategy Day, which was professionally facilitated, not only gave the Council the opportunity to do just that - and very useful it was - but it was helpful in two other respects.

Firstly it gave new members of the Marriage Council the chance to learn a great deal about our earlier work and activities and therefore engage meaningfully in the current work. Secondly it instantly brought the members and their Chairman, Rev John McDowell, together as a working team. Time given to this exercise will undoubtedly be of benefit in the long term as the Council fulfils its remit. For those of us who are longer standing members of the Marriage Council it was equally valuable. Such an exercise is to be strongly recommended.

So in the past year Council has continued to provide Church of Ireland couples and

parishes with strong support before marriage, enrichment programmes during marriage and focussed counselling in the event of difficulty.

Much of the activity has been greatly enabled by the generous grant aid from the Family Support Agency in the Republic of Ireland. However our Strategy Day did highlight the question of whether we are adequately resourced to provide innovative services or indeed serve the whole church geographically.

Marriage Enrichment is a new strand to our activity, and one which we are particularly keen to see developed. One particular programme has been acquired on licence, has been successfully piloted and is currently being adapted for our context.

What is the target group for such a programme?

We are advised by the professionals that it is in the first few years of marriage that such courses are particularly valuable. Yet experience has indicated that marriages of all ages have benefited and the participants have appreciated it.

An enrichment programme simply helps a married couple strengthen their relationship and in a friendly and practical way it provides the tools needed to build a healthy marriage that lasts a lifetime.

I am aware that there is often scepticism about such programmes. I would urge members of Synod and indeed the Church of Ireland as a whole to be positive about the concept of marriage enrichment. Supporting marriage is not just about good preparation and good first aid when required; supporting marriage has to be ongoing.

Effective ways of that ongoing support will have to be innovative and imaginative. We are currently pursuing this one approach and hope that parishes will avail of the opportunity.

It has to be pointed out that Enrichment courses – like any other development programme – need to be delivered by a trained facilitator. We are only too conscious on the Council that trained facilitators are in short supply in our church. It is our intention to train facilitators for this Marriage Enrichment Programme.

As we move from the didactic and ‘I will tell you how’ approach, the challenge to so many aspects of Church life – whether children’s ministry, youth ministry, women’s ministry or discussion and study groups – the challenge is that the skills of facilitation are becoming essential. To have more trained facilitators is a must. We hope this initiative and its skilled delivery will be a useful contribution to our Church.

Finally technology has not been ignored in the past year. Annette McGrath has been responsible for our updated and more modern and user friendly website which has attracted a significant number of hits. The challenge for the future is making maximum use of the website – and in particular exploring the possibility of online counselling. We have benefited in the past year from the professional help of Clare Missen, who is now Consultant to the Council and she is actively pursuing this idea.

We trust this report assures members of Synod of our commitment to support marriage in the context of a society which is often unhelpful and unsympathetic to the concept of Christian marriage.

