

MARRIAGE MATTERS

By the Revd Brian Harper

Despite all the gloomy tales of marriage losing its status as a key institution in the life of our society and church, there is little doubt that nothing beats a good wedding. Almost all the couples that I have been involved with in marriage preparation have been sincere, loving and committed in their preparation, knowing that their “big day” marked the start of a new way of life for the rest of their years. For my couples, that commitment does indeed form the basis of a life of love unto death. It is possible that those years may never see a quarrel or difficulty, whilst others face many challenges. Some will fail to hold on to each other and others will slowly drift apart.

One of the sad parts of my ministry is that, having been so involved with couples in marriage preparation, I rarely get involved when those marriages fall into difficulty. One reason is a simple practical one. The marriage preparation is usually carried out by the bride’s rector, yet the married couple then immediately move to the groom’s church and contact is lost. More often, however, the couple feel that the Church has no part to play in their marriage, even though it was a key element in their wedding. Perhaps there is a feeling of guilt and failure, that the strengths of love and unity which were celebrated at the wedding are now mere shadows. Perhaps the Church needs to bear some of the responsibility for this perception, being quick to condemn not just the weakness but the couples themselves.

The Church of Ireland Marriage Council is a small group of people who endeavour to provide support for couples who are either at the beginning of their journey and preparing for marriage, or who are in need of support as they work through difficulties. We meet 5-6 times a year in Dublin and discuss how best to provide this support.

Marriage Preparation and Counselling

With the help of a generous grant from the Family Support Agency, we are able to provide professional counselling to couples in the Republic of Ireland. Couples can be referred by their rector or by contacting us through editor@marriagematters.ireland.anglican.org. Our counsellors also provide marriage preparation classes in the Republic of Ireland on a one-to-one basis. The couple is asked to contribute towards the cost and the counsellor will discuss this with them at the time of making an appointment. These meetings cover areas such as expectations, sexuality, conflict resolution, parenting etc. and are intended to complement the preparation given by the clergy.

Training for Clergy

Following a successful pilot course in Lurgan, we are planning to roll out a course for clergy to assist them in preparing couples for marriages and in improving their awareness of issues within marriage. This has received very positive feedback and we look forward to its increased availability. We also have an input to the training of ordinands at the Theological Institute.

Support for Clergy Couples

Over the past few years, we have focussed our attention on the particular tensions which might arise with clergy marriages. This has taken the form of questionnaires and focus groups which have raised both positive and negative issues. From this, we have established a programme of encouragement for couples which involves a residential weekend. The emphasis is on affirming the dedication and commitment of couples to one another, their families and their parish. This retreat requires that the rector is given the weekend off to participate and that the cost is part in part by the diocese and the Marriage Council. Parishioners who feel that is a good and practical way of supporting the rectory family should encourage their rector and spouse to avail of the opportunity and should encourage the Select Vestry to subsidise some of the cost as a token of their appreciation.

The current financial difficulty has forced us to think again about how we deliver support to couples. In theory, it should cost nothing to encourage and be of assistance. Sometimes all that is required is a listening ear and a safe place to express our anxieties. However, professional help is also essential in providing the best possible care. We have no budget for this in Northern Ireland and, whilst we have applied for a continuation of funding in the Republic, there is no guarantee that it will be approved. Training of clergy and the provision of retreats also accrues high financial commitment. However, among other ideas, we are planning a series of articles which can be taken up by diocesan and parish publications which we hope will provide advice and encouragement to those planning marriages, to those enjoying a happy and loving marriage, and to those who are possibly drifting apart or facing particular issues. It is important that the Church continues to provide this support to those who wish to uphold the lifestyle of lifelong, committed, loving and faithful marriage and to minister positively to those whose dream has fallen apart.

For all of us, there is a responsibility to continue to support those who are married with encouragement and prayer, and to cherish and nurture our own relationships.