

CHURCH OF IRELAND MARRIAGE COUNCIL

REPORT 2026

MEMBERSHIP

Appointed by the House of Bishops

Member of the House of Bishops: Rt Rev Adrian Wilkinson (Bishop of Cashel, Ferns & Ossory)

Elected by General Synod

Rev Carlton Baxter (Chair) 2/5
Rev Billy Burke 5/5
Mrs Kay Clarke 3/5
Ms Heather James 4/5
Rev Ian Linton (Co-Chair) 5/5
Rev Dr Leonard Madden 4/5
Very Rev Diane Matchett (Sept 2025) 4/4
Mr Daniel McDonald (Nov 2025) 2/3
Ms Esther Simpson 4/5
Dr Catherine Smith (Sept 2025) 4/4

Mothers' Union Representative

Mrs Patsy Devoy (Resigned March 2026) 5/5
Mrs Clare Stewart (March 2026) 1/1

In Attendance

Ms Aisling Sheridan (Administrative Secretary)

New Initiatives

2025 has been a very busy year for the Marriage Council, with four new members joining, and several very successful events.

Webinar – On 21st October, the next in the Council's series of webinars was facilitated by Rev Canon Judi McGaffin. The topic was Blended Families, and a lively discussion was generated, which we hope is just the start of a new path for the Council to explore.

Vision Day – The Council members met for a full day meeting on 4th November in CITI, to assess what is working well and plan for the coming year. Our facilitator was Ms Dianne Morris, and it was a truly inspiring and energizing day. It is planned to hold this day every second year.

2026 looks to be just as busy, starting with a seven-week online Marriage Enrichment Course run in conjunction with Alpha Ireland.. It is also hoped that the Council will also run an annual Marriage Preparation Course online that will be open to all.

Marriage Preparation & Counselling

After many years of receipt of TUSLA funding, in 2024 the Council took a decision to discontinue applying for this funding. Marriage preparation and counselling services are now being paid from an increased allocation of central church funds. The Council continues to offer six free counselling sessions per couple while funds last. Clergy are encouraged to contact Ms Aisling Sheridan, Synod Administrator on aisling.sheridan@rcbcoi.org for further information.

Most counsellors have been making their services available online since the Covid-19 pandemic. Members of the Marriage Council meet regularly online with the panel of counsellors to discuss any issues that arise in how counselling services are provided. In addition to marriage support, some counsellors are available to lead couples through marriage preparation in collaboration with church leaders.

The current group of counsellors used is:

- Mr Brian Griffin (Dublin)
- Ms Dianne Morris (Dublin)
- Ms Shona Rusk (Dublin)
- Ms Heather James (Southeast)
- Ms Sylvia Helen (Cork)
- Ms Kristina Silovs (Monaghan)
- Mr Shawn Jamieson (Southwest)
- Ms Lynne Heber (Belfast)
- Care In Crisis (Armagh)
- Christian Guidelines (Down, Fermanagh & Tyrone)

Whilst these counselling services are available, the Council is very much dependent on clergy and those who support couples to refer them to counsellors. The Council therefore encourages General Synod to promote the use of marriage counsellors in their local parish contexts. Copies of the Council's information leaflet are available at the Synod Reception desk, from Church House Dublin and from aisling.sheridan@rcbcoi.org.

Future Plans

Plans for 2026 include holding further online seminars of one hour each on the following topics:

- Retirement – learning to spend more time together;
- Divorce/separation – supporting through the journey.

As always, the Council is here to support local church leaders and couples. We would be delighted to assist anyone who could benefit from our range of services.

New Members

The Marriage Council has welcomed four new members in 2025:

Rt Rev Adrian Wilkinson (Bishop of Cashel, Ferns & Ossory)
Very Rev Diane Matchett
Dr Catherine Smith
Mr Daniel McDonald

You are all warmly welcome and we look forward to working with you over the coming year.