



SOUTH WARRINGTON AND LYMM

Local Pastoral Area

Consultation Response

Introduction

43 parishioners from St Winefride's, Lymm, St Monica's, Appleton and Blessed John Henry Newman, Latchford gathered on 29 April 2015 to contribute to the consultation. Our thanks to them for the following:

Compassion, acceptance, welcome, encouragement, and non-judgmental; is the language that permeated the discussions. There was tangible yearning for a Church able to throw off attitudes and rules that place it outside the everyday struggles, joys and experiences of life. We do not want to stand aloof but alongside those with whom we live. We want to be able to witness to the essence of the Gospel as the revelation of divine compassionate love incarnate in the life, death, resurrection and teaching of Jesus.

It is as if we realise deep down just how damaging some of the teaching and practice of the Church has been. On the other hand the fact that there was such consensus also testifies to the effectiveness and imprint of the sacramental life of the Church because those who took part regularly participate in the liturgical and pastoral lives of their parishes. They hear week by week, the revelation of God's love in the scriptures and share generously from their personal resources to meet the needs of others.

We have been responding with hope to the sincerity of Pope Francis' call to participate in a world-wide discernment with an honest frankness. Recognising that:

Almighty God could no doubt grant instant perfection to everyone and bestow all the virtues on each of us. But his loving arrangement is that we should need one another – St Aelred of Rievaulx

A. Marriage Preparation - How important/effective is preparation for marriage? And what contribution could the parish/married couple make?

There is a prior question: Why are couples not even presenting themselves for marriage? To which there are several answers including: the perception that Church weddings are necessarily costly, the fact that the proportion of young adults actively involved in Church life is low and lowering and a wider shift in society's perception of the purpose, value and meaning of marriage; to which might be added the proliferation of alternative non church venues and ceremonies. Then there is the fact that many couples cohabit and have children without ever deciding to formalise the arrangement. There is little appreciation or respect sometimes of the added dignity conferred by marriage.

Returning to the quality and effectiveness of the preparation presently available; there is a variety of forms ranging from courses either over a number of sessions or a whole day and/or individual meetings with deacons and priests. The input of experienced married people is always valuable and allows for a wide range of issues to be covered. However, the reduced number of weddings spread out across a year can make the organising of such sessions difficult with too few couples to make them truly viable. It is also good when the clergy are involved with each couple although this should usually be along with in input from those with personal experience of marriage and awareness of the Church's understanding of the richness of this way of life.

Regarding the content of such preparation there is wisdom in presenting the material in less prescriptive formats and tone. This would emphasise our appreciation that marriage is much more than a state of life and more a way of life. There needs to be some sensitivity to the personal situation of individuals and couples, including understanding and respect for those who are not Catholic or indeed adherents to any religion. Preparation for marriage might be more welcome if perceived as a ministry of encouragement.

Additional suggestions included:

- Encouraging our schools to present rounded and positive teaching on marriage and family life.
- Present our teaching and the availability of Church weddings using social media.
- Recognise the difference between preparing a wedding and preparing for marriage and family life.

B. Marriage

3. How could the Church give more/better support to families?

A seemingly obvious yet still essential answer to this question is summed up by the phrase “be welcoming”. This is an attitude or disposition that can help create a context in which those individuals or families experiencing difficulties are more likely to seek support where they anticipate a non-judgmental and sympathetic response.

This welcoming attitude may need working on in communities where some regular members are intolerant of children’s behaviour; often unawares of the background circumstances and issues with which some parents are trying to cope. Having said that it is also acknowledged that parents do have a responsibility to guide their children’s behaviour in a way that enables them to be part of the celebration and limit the level of noise and disturbance. There is a mutuality of responsibility and understanding required.

It is also important to understand in a sympathetic way the changing culture and activities that families engage in these days including weekend work shifts, children’s participation in sports etc.

Another important message to convey is the Church’s respect for decisions made in accordance with the conscience of individuals and couples.

There is real room for the Church community to reach out beyond the confines of its own comfort zone and to invite families not currently involved in parish life.

4. How do you understand ‘responsible parenthood’?

The phrase ‘responsible parenthood’ was interpreted in two ways: in its wider sense pertaining to all aspects of responsible parenting and then as a euphemism for family planning.

So, responsible parents will provide a moral and spiritual framework for their children to mature in virtue. Schools can help with this by their own standards and curriculum. Part of good moral formation is developing good, honest communication including awareness of individual dignity. It would help the Church if it could assume an attitude of awareness and responsiveness to changing social contexts rather than adopting a stance that presumptively interprets such change in negative terms.

If the Church is to do this then the voices struggles and experiences, of ordinary people need to have greater influence in shaping the tone and content of its teaching and practice.

Concerning issues of family planning there is a consensus that the leaders of the Church have to demonstrate that they truly respect the decisions of couples and individuals; by paying more than lip service to the primacy of conscience.

C. Breakdown and Remarriage

5. What help is/should be available when difficulties arise?

Services such as those provided by Marriage Care are one way in which help is already available. They require financial support from parish communities and/or other backers because unlike Relate etc. they do not charge for their services. Recognition was given to the positive help such

organisations provide including schemes to support prisoners and their families who have to endure particular stresses and strains.

In general terms the value of non-judgmental listening and sympathetic support was stressed. As was responding to the new reality that many couples live some distance away from their own immediate family circle who might ordinarily provide support; parish communities might consider trying to provide some of this.

Social changes have affected parish structures too, and whereas previous generations have found a level of support and friendship in organisations such as the UCM etc. contemporary families do not tend to participate in these kinds of organisations.

Consideration needs to be given to identifying issues and providing sensitive support at an early stage before the problems escalate.

6. Is the annulment process known or satisfactory?

There was general agreement that the annulment process was not well known with most people have a vague understanding at best.

As for those who have been through an annulment process; some clearly have misgivings about it. It was described with some acclaim by those taking part in the consultation as being “too complicated and too brutal” a process. There was a shared perception that the process required a kind of emotional dishonesty in which people were expected to agree with a judgement that wrote off a marriage in which a lot of love, energy and experience had been invested, but which had sadly not survived for the long term.

7. How can the Church ‘witness to both mercy and truth’?

It was recognised that the witness to mercy often pays second fiddle to truth. The language used in many Church pronouncements often leaves the impression that those making the pronouncements have little understanding let alone sympathy with the struggles they may face. People often have to look for parishes and clergy for this level of support and understanding while others simply write the Church off as incapable of helping them.

Truth and mercy come together best when there is genuine regard for the conscientious moral decisions of individuals and not when people are judged against a normative template.

8. How welcome and included are the divorced and remarried? Should there be a way of enabling them to receive Holy Communion?

There was a consensus among participants that a way ought to be found to respond positively to the divorced and remarried who like all of us who are aware of personal sinfulness, seek the grace and consolation of the sacraments. There is a place in the Church for ‘zones of mercy’.

The burden of expectation placed on this group is unjust in comparison with other aspects of personal and moral failing. We seem to operate with a set of rules that divide and exclude people. There is a perception that those who have divorced and then try and begin a relationship in which to provide stability and love for their family will not receive the support of the Church.

D. Other Relationships

9. How should we regard cohabitation/cohabitees? How can we respond compassionately to people in irregular unions while remaining faithful to the teaching of Christ and the Church?”

Bearing witness to the rich potential and lived experience of marriage and how it can provide the best context in which to establish and sustain stable and flourishing family life is one of the greatest contributions the Church makes to society. The power of this witness is compromised when we too readily and vehemently adopt negative judgements on other expressions of family and human relationships.

The language we use whether it is ‘living in sin’ or ‘irregular’ to describe such relationships has no resonance in our society. Furthermore, it fails to acknowledge that there has never been a time when everyone conformed to official criteria. Regard must be given to the fact that marriage was only formally recognised as a sacrament in the middle ages when canonical apparatus were imposed on it. The more crucial issue is encouraging people in all walks of life to regain confidence in commitment. There *is* a counter cultural element to the Church’s teaching but its impact is reduced when it is perceived as a form of arrogance, a ‘holier than thou kind’ of message.

We need to desist from the practice of labelling those who are part of our communities as anything other than sisters and brothers in Christ.

10. How can we respond better to people of same-sex attraction and their families? How welcome are gay people in the Church? How can we enable them to feel more welcome?

Given our fundamental stance that all human beings are created in God’s image; it is time for the Church to engage in a considerably more open-minded manner with the findings of contemporary science about all aspects of human sexuality.

Acceptance rather than mere tolerance is called for. The language of tolerance is too ambiguous when it comes to matters affecting our attitude towards our sisters and brothers in the human family. It is unhelpful in the very least when this area of human experience is addressed in the cold and formal language typical of some moral theology and Church documents.

Initiatives such as those sometimes found where gay people are encouraged to come together for Mass etc. are perhaps too rare; although they should only play a part in moving the Church to a position where particular groups have particular Masses, for we are one body in Christ.

Some Additional Issues

- The hope that somewhere in all the deliberations there will be some discussion on how the Church treats those in "the single life".

Such people can sometimes feel completely forgotten when the discussion revolves around "the family" i.e. mum, dad, children etc. with little or no reference, even in the bidding prayers to those who are "single".

Single people should be seen as a valuable asset who can give their time and efforts to the church unencumbered by other distractions. This single life also includes widows and widowers who likewise deserve consideration.

- More needs to be done to support our schools in their efforts to provide effective moral guidance and formation to our young people.
- It is important not to lose sight of the many issues raised by the Church's response to women in society.