
11 Does Christian marriage matter in today's society?

Finally those involved in the Initiative must answer the question set for the students for ourselves. The simple unequivocal answer on the basis of our experience of the last three years cannot be anything but 'yes'.

In a society that is fragmenting around the experience of families with the immense emotional and financial cost involved; where the evidence is that, since the children of divorced parents tend themselves to divorce, the sins of today's fathers and mothers will be visited on the heads of the children perhaps to the third and the fourth generation; today's problems in emotional and health terms can take generations to work their way through society. At the heart of this fragmentation is the breakdown of couple relationships, whether they are formal marital relations or informal ones of cohabitation.¹

In Britain the traditional model of marriage is 'Christian marriage', framed by the ideas contained in the vows made in a church ceremony. Even if a ceremony of a minimal kind takes place in a Registry Office, a hotel or a stately home, the generally held underlying assumptions are probably those contained in the Marriage Services of the different Christian denominations. We have indicated that the values embodied there are not exclusively Christian but are also found in the teaching of other faiths about marriage. Couples who believe themselves to be in Christian marriage have been offered as a 'commonly occurring cultural specimen' for examination by students. There are, of course, other cultural specimens but we have not set out to investigate those but make the assumption that close study of one type will enable other types to be looked at later with greater competence, if anyone wished to do that.

At the outset we made this decision with trepidation. We were taking a risk - against a great deal of advice it must be said - to focus the exploration upon Christian marriage. We had arguments with Christians and non-Christians alike: we were seen as covertly proselytising; there was no such thing as 'Christian marriage'; 'Christian marriage' was paternalistic, anti-sex, rule bound and no type of marriage to put in front of young people; we live in a multicultural society so we are discriminating against others by focusing on Christian marriage.

However, three years later, our experience strongly supports that decision. By choosing to focus on couples who believe themselves to be in a Christian marriage, thus offering young

¹ We described some of the facts about divorce and family breakup in the first chapter of this report.

people examples of marriages that have held together, the kinds of marriage that they themselves might wish to have in due course, we have been able to:

- *Focus on something which is more than just a private arrangement between two individuals*
- *Find sufficient numbers of suitable couples to supply the Workshops' requirements, with needing a cumbersome vetting procedure (which could not have happened if we had focused on 'successful marriages' as we had first proposed)*
- *Find men and women with the courage to offer complete strangers the opportunity to explore the intimate details of their personal lives and the cultures they had developed within their marriages*
- *Find couples with the honesty to allow teenagers to do that without being defensive and protecting themselves by hiding behind proclamations of their faith*
- *Offer to students people who would understand how to describe their marriage as an institution in society as well as a setting for the development of their personal relationships*
- *Assume that there was a variable that had some consistency across three different examples of marriages which were offered to each Workshop, which students could search for and trace which was not simply a coincidental matter of the personalities of the husbands and wives they met*
- *Offer the students experiences of life - including birth and death - that they found to be both relevant and challenging to their own thinking, whatever their personal beliefs and values*
- *Include amongst those couples, people who were inspirational in how they had lived their lives yet who were not out of the ordinary*
- *Show that 'Christian marriage' is not a uniform, standardised form of marriage but something dynamic and variable, responsive to the personalities and circumstances of the couples involved as well as the culture of today's society*
- *Draw on the experience of some couples only one of whom professed to be a Christian but who felt they had a Christian marriage*
- *Find men and women who would intuitively describe their marriages in terms that:*
 - *valued their contribution to the stability of society*
 - *paid attention to experience rather than being conformists to dogma*
 - *were based on a religious faith they could talk about*
- *Give young people, most of whom have little or no knowledge of the Christian faith, the opportunity to see how being truly human is an outcome of living with God as a partner in their family relations*
- *Provide opportunities for students to investigate the authenticity of Christian marriages, both from the perspective of relations between spouses but also their authenticity as part of the structure of society*

Against those points, the students' articles over the last three years suggest that we have developed a methodology that has given students freedom to make up their own minds about whether or not Christian marriage does matter in society today - and some have concluded that it does not. By focusing on Christian marriage the Initiative has also challenged the adults. The Adviser-Coaches have all had to examine their own assumptions about what they meant for themselves by 'Christian marriage' and to think about their own marriages in those terms. In the face of questioning by the students the couples have again and again discovered that they had taken their marriage as an entity for granted; they have been taken back to re-examine its basis, finding precious things that had till then been lost to sight. The members of LISGs, the National Initiative Steering Committee and the staff of the project have all had to examine and re-examine their preconceptions.

As Christian ourselves, one of the remarkable pieces of our experience of this project has been how, again and again, things have happened that took the Initiative forward in quite unexpected and significant ways: the prompting that caused us to focus on Christian marriage; the way we have found the right people for the job at the right time, even when we were on the verge of choosing people who could have caused great difficulties; volunteers have offered themselves when they were needed, sometimes from out of the blue; the extraordinary way the money for the project has been given by over 20 different trusts and individuals - £270,000 over three years - a sum we would not have dreamed possible at the outset. We see all these as signs of God's blessing upon a project which has been testing for all those involved.

We opened this report by asking a question which was not entirely rhetorical: *Can improvisation provide a basis for long term stable relationships?* It will be clear from what we have done that we would answer that by saying 'no'. The experience which we have now shared with over 150 young people, over 50 married couples and the 40 or so men and women who have been Adviser-Coaches and members of LISGs, shows us that marriage is hard work. It has inevitable stresses and strains that cannot be avoided. In former years the surrounding culture was strongly supportive of marriage where by contrast our divorcing culture reflects the fragmentation around anything institutional and around marriage in particular. While our grandparents could go into marriage 'like babes in the wood' and mostly play it off the cuff, that does not hold true any longer.

Several students in the group at Dover College quoted something said to them by one of their visiting couples: *"A ship in a calm harbour without an anchor may stay safe until a storm comes. With an anchor the ship may stay safe through the storm."* This assumes that the ship stays in harbour, but marriage today is a journey across a sea that is at least stormy and sometimes hit by hurricanes. Under those conditions, having some well worked out principles on which to base one's ship design and ways of handling the vessel, is essential if the vessel is not to come to grief.

The Christian marriages of those visiting couples strongly suggest that this kind of marriage *does* matter in today's society. It provides a framework, contributing to the stability of our society, the features of which are expressed in the purposes of marriage contained in the Christian Marriage Services and in the vows which these teenagers have seen to be practical and indeed attractive. What might be feared by those outside Christian marriages - including the young people at first - to be narrow, rule-bound, inflexible and traditional, is not experienced as such by those within such marriages but are very frequently variable, vibrant, generous, lively, robust and modern. To the extent examples such as these can be made available to young people, perhaps the efforts and expense devoted to the retrieval of marriages in difficulty later on, need not be so great.