



**Right Reverend Marcus Stock**

**Bishop of Leeds**

Bishop's House, 13 North Grange Road

Leeds

LS6 2BR

5<sup>th</sup> October 2020

Dear Bishop Marcus,

In 2021 Marriage Care (MC) will mark the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its inception to support families in the Catholic community, whose relationships came under stress after the trauma and upheaval of World War II. In this time, we have helped prepare thousands of couples for the sacrament of marriage and through our counselling provision brought healing and support to those who have struggled in their relationship. As we learn to live with COVID-19 we wanted to share how we have reacted to the challenges of the pandemic and the steps we have taken to ensure continued support for couples in distress, accompany those preparing for marriage and some good news about our new online marriage preparation course, *Preparing Together Anywhere*.

### **Relationship counselling**

Since we were founded in 1946, Marriage Care has been committed to sustaining the family, through the ups and downs of life, as the building block of society. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, we are not prepared to simply stand by while marriages fall apart, exposing children to the real risk of financial and emotional poverty and distress. The future consequences to the well-being of society and the Church should not be underestimated and our volunteer members are rising to that challenge.

*"I am looking for counselling for my marriage. We were struggling before coronavirus hit us and now things are even worse! I am a vulnerable person so am currently off work my husband has been furloughed so we are stuck together with our 2 children and things are escalating rapidly! I am hoping you may be offering online sessions and financially we don't have much to contribute especially with coronavirus affecting us being off work." (Unedited enquiry from 'R', 8 May 2020)*

**We are unique in asking couples who come to us for counselling only to pay what they can afford, reflecting our commitment to support those most in need.**

With the March lockdown our staff and volunteer counsellors responded immediately, making a major shift to webcam counselling, a medium that was completely new to most of our practitioners up until that point. Counsellors were trained and clients were held throughout that transition. Within days our online **webcam relationship counselling service** was fully operational. Over 60% of our counsellors were able to make that change and they are currently delivering sessions equivalent to nearly 100% of those offered face-to-face prior to lockdown. That's over 2,600 sessions so far. This service has been a lifeline for many couples. We currently have 282 couples and individuals on our waiting list, a 142% rise since lockdown eased, and we have no doubt that we will be approached by suffering people in ever greater numbers.

We have also redesigned our highly respected counsellor training programme into a virtual experience, enabling the training to continue despite social distancing restrictions. As a result, 17 trainees from 13



Marriage Care Centres have started training on our **Diploma in Relationship Counselling** course. All being well, these new trainees should start seeing clients via Zoom from December, giving much-needed help for the growing number of couples currently waiting for support.

### **Marriage preparation**

With the loss of face-to-face marriage preparation our staff and volunteer marriage preparation facilitators ensured continuity of support for engaged couples, enabling individual couples to access our facilitated **FOCCUS<sup>1</sup> marriage preparation sessions via webcam**. We now have 75 of our FOCCUS Facilitators actively engaged in this work, supporting over 350 couples. Pre-lockdown 428 couples had pre-booked for one of our face-to-face courses for the Spring/Summer. Most of these couples were forced to defer wedding plans but 40% went ahead to access FOCCUS sessions. We should not underestimate the benefit of these at a time when the strongest relationship may be under stress, allowing the couples to explore the emotional and spiritual aspects of marriage.

### **Preparing Together Anywhere**

I am delighted to announce that one of the positive benefits of lockdown has been the careful revision of our well-regarded resource Preparing Together (PT) to ensure the integrity of its *Imprimatur* into a format suitable for facilitated webcam delivery to engaged couples. We have produced additional resources to enable couples to reflect more deeply in between the sessions on the commitment being entered into. **Preparing Together Anywhere (PTA)** is facilitated by two trained volunteers via webcam with a maximum of 7 couples attending three 90-minute sessions over a period of 3 weeks.

By November we will have trained 41 facilitators to deliver the revised course, with the capacity to reach nearly 900 couples over the coming months. The course was piloted with over 20 couples in August and the evaluation feedback was overwhelmingly positive. There are now 10 courses running with 55 couples booked on so far. More courses are now available and **parish priests can simply direct couples to our website [www.marriagecare.org.uk](http://www.marriagecare.org.uk) to book their place.**

Wedding plans may be on hold for some time, but **couples need not put their preparation for marriage on hold**. PTA and/or FOCCUS sessions skilfully guide couples towards the conversations that matter and an understanding of the marriage covenant. These two programmes complement one another: whilst PT/PTA looks at the tools needed to build a strong secure enduring marriage, FOCCUS allows the couple to delve deeper into their own unique relationship. Together these resources enable the couple to build strong foundations well ahead of their wedding day.

We are, as ever, deeply grateful for your prayers and for the support we have received from parishes and the diocese over many years. If you felt able to promote our work amongst parishes at this time it would be much appreciated and to that end, we have included a few words suitable for parish bulletins and the like.

With every blessing,

**Rev. Roger Carr-Jones**  
Chair of Trustees

**Mark Molden**  
Chief Executive

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<sup>1</sup> Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding & Study is a personalised consultation using a research-based questionnaire and gives couples a good snapshot of how their relationship works. It was developed by FOCCUS Inc., an apostolate of the Archdiocese of Omaha.



**Suggested inserts for parish newsletters:**

*“The earth is filled with harmony and trust when the alliance between man and woman is lived well.” Pope Francis*

At **Marriage Care** we believe that men and women from all walks of life catch a glimpse of something beautiful, hopeful and divine, in the possibilities of marriage and family life. It is a place where the Lord can strengthen the couple’s lives.

Our **marriage preparation** and support service enable couples to nurture faithful and fruitful marriages that last, as we draw on Catholic teaching and contemporary research to help couples focus on the quality of their relationship with each other.

Our latest resource, **Preparing Together Anywhere**, is facilitated by two trained volunteers via webcam. Groups of up to 7 engaged couples attend three 90-minute sessions over a period of 3 weeks, with additional resources to enable couples to reflect more deeply in between the sessions on the commitment being entered into. Wedding plans may be on hold for some time, but couples need not put their preparation for marriage on hold.

Through our **relationship counselling service (now available via webcam)**, we accompany, with compassion and practical wisdom, couples who find themselves in need of support on their journey. Because of the Coronavirus pandemic, we know that increases in family stress and the impending threat of relationship breakdown will plunge many more into financial difficulties. We are unique in asking couples who come to us for counselling only to pay what they can afford, reflecting our commitment to support those most in need.

Please encourage couples to **connect with us today at [www.marriagecare.org.uk](http://www.marriagecare.org.uk)**