In 1946, Marriage Care was established as a charity to support those families in the Catholic community whose relationships came under stress as a result of the trauma and upheaval of World War II. This year, as it celebrates its 70th anniversary, Marriage Care is proud that it is the largest faith-based provider of relationship support services in England and Wales, committed in all aspects of its work to sharing the joy of Catholic understanding of marriage and family life. Today, Marriage Care continues in the tradition of its small start. Its current service is led by a small team of paid staff. Marriage Care offers both marriage preparation courses and relationship counselling. At its Annual Conference in November 2015, members gathered in Eastwood Hall, Nottinghamshire for a very stimulating two-day programme.

160 attendees arrived at Eastwood Hall for the Annual Conference. Most were members of Marriage Care: heads of the 53 centres, practitioners and support volunteers, staff and trustees. They had come from all parts of England and Wales, some alone and some with their spouses. They hoped to meet friends, to network and to learn and be inspired by the speakers. The programme was wide ranging and the speakers eminent in fields such as law, academia, theology and psychology but with a shared commitment to marital health, stability and flourishing. Between each session, an informal "on the sofa" conversation took place with the speaker which allowed members of the audience to raise issues or questions if they wished.

The conference was opened by Marriage Care’s Oxford Centre with a reflection on journeys. An adaptation of Psalm 23 “The Lord is my pacemaker” was read, with a reflection based on Caspar David Friedrich’s painting “On the Sailing Boat”, a picture of a couple staring out to sea – a metaphor for marriage with God at the helm. Kit Dollard, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, then formally opened the conference, and continued on the theme of journeys. He opened Marriage Care’s team visit to Philadelphia for the 8th World Meeting of Families, to learn what marriage preparation and counselling is available within the worldwide Catholic Church. Kit then spoke of the visit to the 14th Ordinary Synod of Bishops in Rome; his overwhelming feeling was that the Synod reflected the Church journeying with families with the reality and the challenges of family life while using it as a vocation and a mission to love others. Marriage Care’s
role in Rome to support two English Bishops, Cardinal Vincent Nichols and Bishop Peter Doyle, and "to be a witness to families we meet in our work as part of our discussions with Bishops".

Mark Molden, Marriage Care's CEO, then outlined some of the highlights of the past year, outlining the differences we had made, how we had raised our profile, developed our relationship with the Catholic Church and he gave an overview of our financial health and good governance.

Susanna Abse, CEO of the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (TCCR) in London spoke on "Repairs and Repair", wholly in the concept of counselling. With humour and insight, Susanna spoke of the mistakes that lead to rupture or hurts in a relationship, and the mistakes made by counsellors which disturb the counselling relationship. As might be expected, she stresses the therapeutic alliance is, the more steady the repairs are repaired. As a result of research carried out by the TCCR which revealed that many clients do not continue with therapy after their assessment phase due to the anxiety it provoked, TCCR had modified their processes.

Session 3 was taken by Sir Paul Coleridge, Founder of The Marriage Foundation. Having been a High Court judge specializing in family law, Sir Paul spoke of how his experience had impressed on him the importance of preventing family breakdown which may, he believed, be the root of many social problems and had led to a significant burden on the taxpayer equivalent to £47 billion a year. The key to family breakdown, he believed, was marriage, marriage but otherwise other relationships tend not to. He was not afraid to take a traditional view of marriage and challenged the commonly held idea that other relationships were just as valid. For that reason, Sir Paul established the Marriage Foundation three years ago to promote the value of marriage through media and to lobby government to provide more support for marriage. Sir Paul believed that educating couples and providing help in times of crisis reflected Marriage Care's own work in both marriage preparation and in counselling.

Dr Clare Watkins, a Trustee of Marriage Care and a member of the Ministry team at Roehampton University, then spoke. She offered her reflections on the recent Synod on the Family and how that links to the true vocation of Marriage Care. Linking theological observations of the Final Relatio and the three fundamental themes of Listening, Learning and Locating, she gave some thought provoking examples of the traditions of each of these themes. She spoke of the mission of Marriage Care in its call to alleviate relationship poverty and to assist in social transformation and the reinforced that our work is at the heart of the Church. In ending, Clare spoke of some of the practical implications for Marriage Care of deepening and broadening our vocation in response to the Synod.

Session 5 was taken by Aldegonde Brenninkmeijer, Co-Founder of Intams. Aldegonde spoke of "kenosis", the art of emptying ourselves through listening to absorb the messages of those who seek our help. Her call to us was to seek the Synod's teaching without being influenced by any prejudices or preconceptions.
by listening to the Spirit of God that was present in Rome. Aldegonde identified three stages in her own forty-eight year marriage: the first was exploration—the period of engagement when there was much to celebrate and guidance was given by all—family, priest and others. It was a period of absorption, especially in seeking out their special spirituality. The second stage was transformation—an extended period where there was much tension as society changed and the Church was trying to keep up, and the tensions created by Humanae Vitae in 1968 which was unacceptable to many. Finally, elevation—a time of self-reflection through a lifetime of listening and learning and an ability to reach higher planes. Aldegonde suggested that mentors in marriage could be a good thing but resources for that could be a problem. She closed by telling us that discernment was the important skill we could apply in our work and daily lives.

At the end of the day, Mass was celebrated by Bishop Patrick McKinney with Bishop Peter Doyle concelebrating.

Aldegonde identified three stages when meritorious awards were presented to staff by Kit O'Donnell and Bishop Doyle, Brandy Bauld and Janet Leathard. She stressed the link between the work of Marriage Care and the role of bishops, which led by Chris Meallven, Head of Marriage Care's Nottingham/Derby Centre who had served in the Royal Navy.

Brian and Marion Devine then shared their personal story with Brin Devine, on the sofa. They told us, during a Marriage Encounter weekend in 1977, they discovered their calling and realised that couples were not receiving sufficient support after their marriage preparation course. Having had five children in seven years, they understood the stresses of family life, so they had developed a 16-page booklet to help couples prepare for marriage and they had written a trilogy of books that reflect on readings in Mass. They also developed "Marriage Matters", a weekly 60-word snippet of reflections, based on Sunday Mass scripture readings and specifically directed at couples.

The Chief Executive, Mark Molden, gave the closing address. He spoke of some of the joys and challenges of reaching out to support couple relationships in the best and worst of times in the context of UK family life. Mark based his address on the quote from St Augustine of Hippo: "Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are."

Mark reflected on Marriage Care's theme for the conference "Reaching out" and shared St Matthew's story of a leper coming to Christ asking him to be healed. Jesus reached out His hand, touched him and healed him. This story was moving of love and Jesus, filled with compassion, met all his needs not only the physical, but also his emotional needs. Mark compared the current lack of love and family breakdown to leprosy. He could see Marriage Care's members as reaching out through the stigma of relationship failure, not turning away but touching couples by listening, offering hope for the future and reassurance, so Marriage Care's members do what Jesus did for this man.
Mark then went on to give an overview of relationships in the United Kingdom. He reminded us that 42% of children reach the age of 16 have seen the breakdown of their parent's relationship. Overall family breakdown – whether married or not – is concentrated in the early years of parenting; half of all family breakdown takes place before a child's third birthday and concentrated amongst those who are unmarried. After a child is three, unmarried couples account for 75% of all couples who split up.

UK society is changing. 90% of today's 60 year old women have been married. Based on current trends, only 52% of today's 20 year olds will marry despite the almost universal aspirations our children have to get married one day and this is having an effect on our children's likelihood of growing up in a stable family. 82 per cent of "intact" couples with children under the age of 16 are married. This figure then rises to over 90 per cent for couples with children aged 13-15. 73% of married parents remain together while bringing up their children to the age of 14 or 15 whereas only 31% of those who never marry manage this. However, even amongst those who are married, only 44% of those who marry after they've had their baby end up staying together.

There is a huge discrepancy between children living in low income households and those in middle to high income households, where 65% of the poorest children aged between 11 and 16 are not living with both their birth parents as opposed to 38% of those coming from more wealthy households. One million children have no meaningful contact with their fathers and lose touch with their grandparents as a result of separation or divorce. However, even for those who are married, 42% of marriages in England and Wales will end in divorce. Around one third of these divorces are expected to occur in the first 10 years of marriage. The growth in non-religious weddings has been

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explosive, particularly in the last 30 years with over 70% of all weddings involving civil ceremonies.6

Mark spoke of the huge challenge facing Marriage Care and the resources given to tackling the problem are miniscule. For every £100 spent on family breakdown, the government spends only 1.5 pence on support and prevention. Marriage Care has a vision that dares to hope for a society in which all adults can build and sustain strong, healthy couple relationships and the courage to see that they do not remain that way. Our belief is that a culture shift in our nation and within church communities is possible – one that will help couples build and sustain strong, fulfilling, healthy marriages and relationships – within the messiness and storms of life.

These bleak statistics mask some good news however. Over the years 2010-2013, the number of children aged 0-16 living with both their parents has increased by 1.1 million, representing 12% of all families and 16% of families headed by a couple. In 2013, there were 12.2 million married families, representing 67% of all families and 81% of families headed by a couple. Of these, there were 4.6 million married families with children, representing 26% of families and 35% of families headed by a couple. In 2012, there were 262,240 marriages, an increase of 5.3% on 2011. Of these, 2 out of 3 were a first marriage for both spouses.

"Hope has two beautiful daughters: their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are." That’s why Marriage Care has an audacious vision that dares to hope for “…a society in which all adults can build and sustain strong, fulfilling, healthy marriages and relationships so that we can rebuild family life in our communities and our world.”

Mark Molden is Chief Executive Officer of Marriage Care, UK.

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