



Guidelines for the Preparation of Couples for Marriage



Department for Christian Responsibility & Citizenship
Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales



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Catholic Trust for England & Wales. 39 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1BX
Registered in England & Wales. Registered Charity Number: 1097482
Company Number: 4734592



First Published 2016 by:
Rejoice Publications
(an imprint of Matthew James Publishing Ltd)

Unit 46, Goyt Mill, Marple, Stockport SK6 7HX

www.matthewjamespublishing.com

ISBN: 978-1-910265-39-0

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eBook Produced by Vivlia

Acknowledgments

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Canon 1063

Pastors of souls are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful the assistance by which the matrimonial state is preserved in a Christian spirit and advances in perfection. This assistance must be offered especially by:

1. Preaching, catechesis adapted to minors, youth, and adults, and even the use of instruments of social communication, by which the Christian faithful are instructed about the meaning of Christian marriage and about the function of Christian spouses and parents;
2. Personal preparation to enter marriage, which disposes the spouses to the holiness and duties of their new state;
3. A fruitful liturgical celebration of marriage which is to show that the spouses signify and share in the mystery of the unity and fruitful love between Christ and the Church;
4. Help offered to those who are married, so that faithfully preserving and protecting the conjugal covenant, they daily come to lead holier and fuller lives in their family.

These Guidelines should be read alongside two further documents:

1. *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis' exhortation on marriage and family life, which restates the beauty of marriage and family life, indicates how couples ought to be initiated into marriage and accompanied thereafter, and stresses the importance of the whole community in proclaiming anew the good news of marriage and family life. Sections relating specifically to marriage preparation have been included here as an Appendix but the whole document is essential reading for all those involved in marriage preparation.
2. The Order of Celebrating Matrimony: English translation according to the Second Typical Edition This provides an excellent Introduction on the Importance and Dignity of the Sacrament of Matrimony, the Duties and Ministries in both the preparation and celebration of marriage, and the Preparation for the Sacrament, and Rite to be used. Appendices give examples of the Universal Prayer, the Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple, the Order of Blessing a Married Couple within Mass on the Anniversary of Marriage and the Order of Celebrating Marriage – Form for use at Convalidation. The Introduction to the Order of Celebrating Matrimony has been included here as an Appendix, as essential support for all those preparing couples for marriage.

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Foreword

The *Guidelines for the Preparation of Couples for Marriage* are the fruit of several years' work including a survey of marriage preparation and the first ever national gathering of marriage preparation providers hosted by the Bishops' Conference in 2011.

The publication of these *Guidelines* is timely following the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, and the introduction of the new *Order of Celebrating Matrimony* at Easter 2016.

Amoris Laetitia highlights the importance of marriage preparation:

“The complexity of today’s society and the challenges faced by the family require a greater effort on the part of the whole Christian community in preparing those who are about to be married.... In this regard, the Synod Fathers agreed on the need to involve the entire community more extensively by stressing the witness of families themselves and by grounding marriage preparation in the process of Christian initiation by bringing out the connection between marriage, baptism and the other sacraments. The Fathers also spoke of the need for specific programmes of marriage preparation aimed at giving couples a genuine experience of participation in ecclesial life and a complete introduction to various aspects of family life.”

These *Guidelines* open the way for integrating marriage preparation more fully into the life of each parish community and for encouraging our parishes to support couples in the life-long journey of marriage, through liturgical celebrations, community events, and all kinds of groups from prayer to parenting.

The *Guidelines* are aimed at all those involved in providing marriage Preparation, to support but not dictate their training, continuing professional development, delivery methods and content. The *Guidelines* are offered as a benchmark of good practice and a tool for reviewing parish and diocesan marriage preparation practices.

Much is already happening, and these *Guidelines* are geared to help develop that work of dioceses, deaneries, pastoral areas and parishes in preparing couples for the Sacrament of Marriage.



Rt Rev Peter Doyle
Chair, Bishops' Committee for Marriage and Family Life

Executive Summary

1. These *Guidelines for the Preparation of Couples for Marriage* propose a new emphasis for marriage preparation in the Catholic Church in England and Wales, in which the traditional ‘course’, however structured, is seen and understood as just one element in a broader *process of preparation* offered to the couple by the whole parish, when they ask to be married in church.
2. This fresh approach stems from the mutuality of the relationship between parish and family: “the very nature of each as a community of life and love.”¹ It is further recommended by research into marriage preparation in the Catholic Church in England and Wales in 2010² and the pastoral urgency “involving all Church structures ...to provide adequate preparation for marriage in a kind of new catechumenate.”³
3. The process of marriage preparation proposed here therefore follows closely the model of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), which is the model and inspiration for all catechesis in the Christian community (General Directory for Catechesis #59):
 - A process which is both flexible and gradual, meeting each couple where they are, and accompanying them in a steady and reassuring way, with love.
 - A journey which is filled with the grace of God who is love, and who has called the couple to live out their love for each other in the faithful, life-long and fruitful relationship of marriage, with the support of the Christian community.
 - A staged process which appreciates that couples need preparation in both relational and religious aspects of marriage, for the best start to their married life, encouraging and equipping them to build a relationship that will last forever.

As the recent exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* states:

“Marriage preparation should be a kind of “initiation” to the sacrament of matrimony, providing couples with the help they need to receive the sacrament worthily and to make a solid beginning of life as a family.”

4. The stages of marriage preparation explored in these *Guidelines* include:
 1. Initial welcome, listening and discernment of needs.
 2. Welcome by the parish.
 3. The marriage preparation course.
 4. Deepening the couple’s relationship with the parish and their life of faith.
 5. Final preparation for the liturgy, the Order of Celebrating Matrimony.
 6. Celebrating the wedding.
 7. Life as a married couple.
5. The *Guidelines* are underpinned by an extensive theological preface which expresses both the goodness of marriage, and the richness of the Church’s teaching about the vocation and sacrament of matrimony. This moment in the lives of the couple is an opportunity to know again the message of God’s mercy, to deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ and his Church,

1 Address of Pope Francis to the Officials of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota. 22 January 2016. Available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/january/documents/papa-francesco_20160122_anno-giudiziario-rotaromana.html

2 Coleman, L., 2012. Marriage preparation in the Catholic community: an independent assessment of evaluative data. London: One Plus One. [online] Available at: <http://www.catholicfamily.org.uk/what-we-do/Marriage-preparation/guidelines-for-Marriage-preparation>

3 Pope Francis, 22 January 2016. See note 1.

and to hear the comforting message that God loves them, saves them and walks with them. It presents an opportunity for profound conversion to the Gospel.

6. The *Guidelines* also address the content of marriage preparation programmes (Section 3), the need to train and support marriage preparation providers (Section 4), to further evidence the impact of marriage preparation (Section 5), to celebrate the benefits of marriage preparation (Section 6) and to make marriage preparation more accessible (Section 7). The overarching goal is to support the efforts of the local church in preparing couples for marriage, to reach more couples through this ministry to their lifelong commitment and thus to increase the benefits of marriage preparation, for the couples involved, for the Church and for society as a whole (See Appendix 4).
7. The *Guidelines* are intended to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. A range of actions are suggested for parishes and dioceses (see Section 8). In the first instance parishes are encouraged to undertake a review of their current provision for marriage preparation (see Appendix 6) with a view to convening a whole parish meeting to consider any actions suggested by the mapping process in the light of these *Guidelines*. It is recommended that Dioceses develop a collaborative marriage preparation 'team' or group with clergy and lay people from across the diocese to support parishes in this endeavour.

Theological Preface

1. This preface seeks to communicate important aspects about the goodness of marriage as well as the richness of the Church's teaching about the vocation and sacrament of matrimony. When couples approach the Church to request the celebration of their marriage, they reveal a sign of their deepest hopes and intentions. It is an indication that they wish to celebrate their marriage in the context of the Gospel and the Church, whatever the circumstances by which they arrive and even if their path of faith has been winding and uncertain. We trust, too, that their choice expresses a desire for the permanence of marriage and the stability given by the sacrament as well as a new commitment to love each other.
2. This moment in the lives of the couple is an opportunity to know again the message of God's mercy, to deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ and his Church, and to hear the comforting message that God loves them, saves them and walks with them. It presents an opportunity for profound conversion to the Gospel. The preparation for marriage, which this document addresses, is therefore a special opportunity for not only preparing for the wedding but also explaining and exploring God's vision for marriage, the understanding of the human person, the centrality of the family as the 'domestic Church' in our society, and the meaning of love and sexuality that is offered, for our salvation, by the teaching of the Church. People learn about marriage from the witness of married love and the way it is lived out in family life with its joys and sorrows, hopes and sufferings. The importance of the role of married couples in the ministry of marriage preparation is addressed in this document. The ways in which we can affirm marriage and celebrate wedding anniversaries in the life of a parish or a diocese is very important for couples and witnesses to the good of Christian marriage for future generations.
3. One way in which we can explore the understanding of marriage is to reflect on the threefold blessing at the end of marriage rite.

*May God the eternal Father keep you of one heart in love for one another,
that the peace of Christ may dwell in you and abide always in your home.*

*May you be blessed in your children, have solace in your friends
and enjoy true peace with everyone.*

*May you be witnesses in the world to God's charity,
so that the afflicted and needy who have known your kindness
may one day receive you thankfully into the eternal dwelling of God.*

This triple blessing expresses well the three essential elements of the Church's teaching about marriage which are presented in this Preface: that marriage is of God and that Christ is truly at the heart of a Christian marriage; that married love is intended to be fruitful in the birth of children and in the fostering of the community of the family; that marriage and family life are a key witness to the love of God in reaching out to those most in need, and that it will find its fulfilment in the joy of heaven. They express the way in which love in marriage extends outwards so that the family can be understood as the 'domestic Church' which witnesses and makes real the love of Christ for his Church in the midst of everyday activities which include healing, forgiveness, celebration, sacrifice and fidelity.

We now explore each of these blessings.

4. *May God the eternal Father keep you of one heart in love for one another, that the peace of Christ may dwell in you and abide always in your home.*

The foundation of Christian marriage is found in the Book of Genesis. The author reflects on the experience of love and the strong attraction that man and woman have for each other and the desire to form a family. God in his love has created man and woman in his image as the

summit of his creation and invites them to give themselves to each other as a gift for the good of the other. In the second chapter of the Book of Genesis, God recognises the loneliness that Adam experiences: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner” (Gen 2:18). God then creates the animals but Adam remains alone at the deeper level of communication and relationship. Only with the creation of Eve is his deepest longing satisfied and he responds to her with joy, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken” (Gen 2:23).

5. In God’s plan man and woman are called into relationship, to communicate by word, look and touch, and express their giftedness in sexual intimacy as ‘one flesh’ for the procreation of children and the good of one another. Through life-long commitment to one another they grow in friendship in an intimate partnership of life and love to become a ‘communion of persons’. Complementarity between man and woman means that in each and in being together the image of God is to be seen. Pope Francis states, “Not only man as such, not only woman as such, but rather man and woman, as a couple, are the image of God. The difference between them is not a question of contrast or subordination, but instead of communion and generation, always in the image and semblance of God.” (Audience, 15th April 2015) Whilst each spouse is created in the image and likeness of God, together they are an icon of the Blessed Trinity who is Love and called to give themselves to each other freely in creative acts of love and lifelong service understood in this way. This is the reality of marriage which is its foundation as a sacrament for it makes present in our world the very mystery of God.
6. Marriage, then, is a public statement and a declaration of a commitment of love and stability for the life of the couple and the life of their children. Marriage is never a merely private or family affair. It is rightly celebrated within the community of the parish. It is the bedrock of society.
7. The Fall breaks this design of harmony and introduces sin into human relationships. Human brokenness makes relationship and communication more difficult. It introduces selfishness and self-centeredness. God’s grace given through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross means that God in his mercy restores the relationship with humanity through his love. By baptism a person becomes an adopted child of God the Father and receives the gift of sanctifying and healing grace.
8. The beginning of Christian Sacramental marriage is the sacrament of baptism by which one becomes a living, active member of the Body of Christ. Through our Christian living we are called to imitate Christ and begin a process of ongoing conversion so that our words, actions and values are developed in the light of Christ’s teaching and his revelation of the kingdom of God. Central to this life of discipleship is the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, the commandment of love and an understanding of sacrificial love which is demonstrated by Christ most fully by giving his life on the cross. Prayer and the sacraments are the means by which husband and wife grow in friendship with the Lord. They are an essential part of family life by which love of God and Christian faith is handed onto children.
9. Marriage is created by consent and consummation. The marriage vows witness to the stability and permanence of this love since a permanent bond is formed when people marry. This means that husband and wife give themselves to each other in an exclusive and life-long intimate partnership of life and love. Often marriages take place between two baptised persons, although one may not be a Catholic. The Church recognises the baptism of many other Christian traditions. Sometimes one of the spouses is not baptised. Nevertheless, in a marriage a permanent bond is formed which is recognised by the Church. When two Christians marry in the Church, they enter into the covenant of love that is modelled on the love of Christ for his Church. Christ lives and walks with them and transforms them with his presence. In this case, marriage is an indissoluble sacrament of the Church when freely entered into with understanding and the right intention.
10. The love between husband and wife is like the love of Christ for his Church (Ephesians 5). The vocation of husband and wife, by which they are united to Christ in a powerful way, means

that they are called and empowered to love as God loves with the gift of self to the other: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21). The depth of this covenant of love is revealed when Jesus washes his disciples’ feet at the Last Supper and then pours out his life on the cross, offering himself to the Father in perfect love. Husband and wife are called to be “foot-washers” and servants of one another, imitating Jesus who came to serve and not to be served. Through dedication, sacrifice, friendship, love and God’s grace, peace is built in the Christian home.

11. *May you be blessed in your children, have solace in your friends and enjoy true peace with everyone.*

Marriage is a gift given by God so that man and woman may flourish in a generous and fruitful love for each other, for the good of their children, and society. Love within the matrimonial union has a number of dimensions: it includes the sexual expression of erotic passionate love, the love of friendship so that one spouse may say to the other, ‘You are my best friend’, as well as the daily self-sacrificing love. It is in this context that we can reflect on the meaning of sexual love in the life of man and woman in marriage.

12. God’s gift of love finds its fullest expression within married life through the act of sexual intimacy, “As a consequence, husband and wife, through that mutual gift of themselves, which is specific and exclusive to them alone, develop that union of two persons in which they perfect one another, cooperating with God in the generation and rearing of new lives” (Humanae Vitae 8). This act of love, modelled on God’s love, is open and other-centred. Love is an act of freewill which is always respectful of the other spouse and is mutual as given and received. Such love calls for a total giving of oneself to the other in all aspects of being: love-making flows from the expressions of tenderness, kindness, joy and self-sacrifice experienced in every-day life, and it nourishes the daily life that follows it. In such love the husband affirms his wife and values her as capable of being mother. The wife similarly affirms her husband and values him as father of their possible child. In this way, the procreative and unitive meanings of sexual intimacy affirm the roles of the parents and their love for each other. It is this openness and understanding of sexual intimacy which the Church protects in her teaching about responsible parenthood and why she places such high value on practical support for couples in acquiring and living natural fertility awareness. Union of the spouses in sexual intercourse as an expression of being ‘one flesh’ builds the partnership of life and love and is open to the gift of new life.

13. *May you be witnesses in the world to God’s charity, so that the afflicted and needy who have known your kindness may one day receive you thankfully into the eternal dwelling of God.*

For the baptised, marriage is a particular witness to the love of God in the world. Christian love always reaches out to others. The scriptures reveal how Jesus always has time for one who is sick and in need of healing, the one who is oppressed and desires freedom, the poor and the needy. The mercy of God reaches out to include the stranger and welcome the one who is on the margins. In the same way, married love is called to reach out and embrace others through family relationships and friendship. Families have many different stages of life. The gift and joy of a child changes the relationship of husband and wife and calls for attention and love for the child. Children at different stages make various demands on their parents. With the passing of years, the child grows in maturity and capacity to make decisions. When children leave home, the parents face a time of renewal of their relationship as they have more time together but also may have the demands of looking after aging parents. The choices which an adult child makes can be very painful for parents, especially if they turn away from the faith and from the values which are important in a family, and yet the parents’ love remains (c.f. the Parable of the Lost Son, Luke 15:11-32). Some marriages bear the pain of childlessness which is a cross to be carried yet also an invitation to extend love out to others. St. Paul describes the way in which the love within the family is called to witness to the love of God in the world:

“You are God’s chosen race, his saints; he loves you and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive each other as soon as a quarrel begins. The Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same. Over all these clothes, to keep them together and complete them, put on love. And may the peace of Christ reign in your hearts, because it is for this that you were called together as parts of one body. Always be thankful. Let the message of Christ, in all its richness, find a home with you. Teach each other, and advise each other, in all wisdom. With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms and hymns and inspired songs to God; and never say or do anything except in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Col 3:12-17⁴

14. This final part of the blessing reminds us of the commandment of love and the divine imperative to recognise and respect every person as a neighbour and be committed to his or her well-being, cherishing life and living in solidarity. Many families are concerned about the care of their neighbours, give time and energy to the work of charities and do not hesitate to give alms generously. In very practical ways, the family, as the domestic Church, witnesses to the love of Christ (c.f. Mt 25:31-46). This part of the blessing reminds us of the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Lk 16:19-31) and also the words of the *In paradisum* which we hear at Christian funerals:

“May the angels lead you into paradise; may the martyrs come to welcome you and take you to the holy city, the new and eternal Jerusalem. May choirs of angels welcome you and lead you to the bosom of Abraham; and where Lazarus is poor no longer may you find eternal rest.”

15. Pope Francis has spoken frequently of his desire that the members of the Church become ‘missionary disciples’, seeking to reach out to all, especially those at the margins of society. The mission of the family is an “essential agent in the work of evangelisation” and makes real and reveals God’s love in the world. Through his Church, Christ bestows on each marriage and the family the grace necessary to witness to the love of God, live His blessings, and create a unity of life and love which is God’s plan for human beings and a revelation of the wonder of God.

Conclusion

16. The Church has a responsibility to help people prepare for the great commitment of marriage and to support them throughout their married lives. It is the intention of this document to assist that process.

We conclude with words of Pope Francis addressed to those preparing for marriage:

“In the prayer of the Our Father we say: ‘Give us this day our daily bread.’ Spouses can also learn to pray like this: ‘Lord, give us this day our daily love,’ for the daily love of spouses is bread, the true bread of the soul, what sustains them in going forward... This is the prayer for engaged couples and spouses. Teach us to love one another, to will good to the other! The more you trust in him, the more your love will be ‘forever,’ able to be renewed, and it will conquer every difficulty.” (14th February 2014)⁵

⁴ Colossians, 3:12-17 Jerusalem Bible London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966

⁵ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/february/documents/papa-francesco_20140214_incontro-fidanzati.html

Introduction

“There are a number of legitimate ways to structure programmes of marriage preparation, and each local Church will discern how best to provide a suitable formation without distancing young people from the sacrament. They do not need to be taught the entire Catechism or overwhelmed with too much information. Here too, “it is not great knowledge, but rather the ability to feel and relish things interiorly that contents and satisfies the soul.” Quality is more important than quantity, and priority should be given – along with a renewed proclamation of the kerygma – to an attractive and helpful presentation of information that can help couples to live the rest of their lives together “with great courage and generosity.” Marriage preparation should be a kind of “initiation” to the sacrament of matrimony, providing couples with the help they need to receive the sacrament worthily and to make a solid beginning of life as a family.” *Amoris Laetitia* #207

1. These Guidelines propose a Christ-centred formation for marriage, set within the context of the Christian community, integrating the relational and religious dimensions of the couple relationship, treating both with equal attention and concern. The Guidelines aim to support local communities in preparing couples and also in celebrating and affirming the sacrament of marriage as it is lived out. Across England and Wales those involved in preparing couples are described variously as catechists, facilitators, trainers, presenters and providers. For consistency this document uses the term *provider*, whilst acknowledging its limitations. When reading these *Guidelines* it is important to note some other key principles.

A: Proximate and Immediate Preparation

Whilst acknowledging that marriage Preparation is a gradual and continuous process⁶ of *remote* (beginning in infancy, through to adolescence), *proximate* (catechesis for young people, through relational, moral and spiritual formation, presenting the sacrament of marriage), and *immediate* preparation these Guidelines focus on the later stages of proximate preparation merging into immediate preparation, i.e. the period from an engaged couple’s first approach to the Church, the period of preparation and the celebration of the rite. The Guidelines also acknowledge the need for continuing support during the couple’s life-long commitment to their marriage.⁷

B: Roles and Responsibilities

Preparation for marriage and the wedding itself is naturally of most concern to those personally involved, couples who are about to be married and their families. But bishops and priests have the primary responsibility of ensuring that Christian marriage is valued and lived in the community. All others in the community are encouraged to share in the responsibility of welcoming and preparing couples for marriage. Alongside the ministry of the priest and the deacon, are those services of administration, welcome, couple mentoring (or couple support and companionship), as well as facilitation of programmes of preparation and the sharing of gifts of experience and wisdom with couples preparing for marriage.

⁶ See Canons 1063-1065; *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) #66; *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*, Pontifical Council for the Family (1996)

⁷ *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) #69

C: Principles

Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage by the Pontifical Council for the Family (1996), describes marriage preparation as “a broad and thorough process of education for married life” (#10). It continues: “Christian marriage preparation can be described as a journey of faith which does not end with the celebration of marriage but continues throughout family life” (#16). The image of “a journey of faith” points to the model of formation offered in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), which is proposed by the Church as the exemplar for all catechesis.⁸ It follows that preparation for marriage in the Catholic Church can rightly and usefully be viewed in the light of the principles and practice of Christian Initiation.

“It is a path that goes slowly ahead, but it is a path of maturation. The steps of the journey should not be rushed. This is how we mature, step by step. The time of betrothal can truly become a time of initiation, into what? Into surprise. Into the surprise of the spiritual gifts with which the Lord, through the Church, enriches the horizon of the new family that stands ready to live in his blessing.” Pope Francis, Catechesis on Engagement. (27 May 2015)⁹

The following principles of RCIA are offered as a guide to the process of marriage preparation recommended in these Guidelines:

1. The whole community is responsible for the process.

They must be fully prepared:

- to help couples, and give evidence of the spirit of the Christian community;
- to welcome them into their homes, into personal conversation, and into community gatherings.¹⁰

This commitment is not only in the preparation, but throughout married life.

2. It takes place in steps and stages.

The decision to get married places the couple in a liminal space on the threshold of their vocation to marriage. They step from proposal, acceptance and engagement, to a step of welcome in the community, and a time of catechesis, and liturgical preparation, followed by the ritual celebration of the marriage, and life-long living out of the sacrament. Their experience should be welcoming, flexible, and gradual, in steps and stages, according to the free cooperation of the individuals, the action of the church, the circumstances of time and place and the grace of the Holy Spirit.

3. It is filled with the grace of God¹¹ and the spirit of the Gospel.

Preparation for the sacrament of marriage in a Christian setting stirs openness to God in the couples' lives. It is God's call and initiative within the couple, and their love and commitment bring treasure to our communities.

4. The education or catechetical formation is gradual, and at the same time, complete.

The content of the whole marriage preparation experience offered in the context of a welcoming faith community, equips the couple with knowledge of human development and communication skills, supports them in building a strong and lasting marriage, and also assures them of continuing thoughtful and friendly help from the community.

8 General Directory for Catechesis, #90; Protocol for the RCIA, confirmed by the Congregation for Divine Worship, 10 June 1986

9 <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015/index.2.html>

10 Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Study Edition, (1987) #4-7, 9

11 Catechism of the Catholic Church 1608: men and women need the help of the grace that God in his infinite mercy never refuses them, in order to achieve the union of their lives for which God created them ‘in the beginning’.

5. The interwoven dynamics of catechesis.

Integral to the human formation is exploration of the sacramental nature of Christian marriage, connecting with God's invitation to faithful, loving, fruitful relationship, through the dynamics of

- engaging with Scripture and Church teaching;
- the life of the community;
- the Liturgy of the Church (including the Rite of Marriage itself);
- deepening understanding of the goodness of marriage as well as the richness of the Church's teaching about the vocation and sacrament of matrimony (see the Theological Preface).

6. 'Mystagogy' or post-sacrament catechesis/reflection/life-long deepening of the mystery.

After the celebration of the Rite of Marriage, the goodwill of the community towards the couple continues to be paramount. The parish have a duty to nourish them in their vocation, and help them live out their married life. There should be invitations to engage in the life of the community wherever possible and opportunities for reflection and enrichment, as well as support in times of hardship.

"The sacrament of marriage is a great act of faith and love: a witness to the courage to believe in the beauty of the creative act of God and to live that love that is always urging us to go on, beyond ourselves and even beyond our own family. The Christian vocation to love unconditionally and without limit is what, by the grace of Christ, is also at the foundation of that free consent that constitutes marriage." Pope Francis. Catechesis on the Beauty of Christian marriage. (6th May 2015)¹²

¹² <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015.index.2.html>



The Process of Marriage Preparation



= CHRIST'S PRESENCE "I am with you always."

3

**Marriage
Preparation
Course**



4

**Deepening relationship with
parish/life of faith. Conversations
& Catechesis opportunities.
Gospel and Spirituality.
Sacrament Consent/Vows
witness scripture**



7

**Life as a Married Couple -
family life through all stages,
in joys and sorrows. Pastoral
accompaniment, mutual
exchange of gifts parish/family.**



1

Initial welcome,
listening,
discernment.

2

Welcome
in Parish



5

Preparation
for the liturgy
= Order of
Celebrating
Matrimony



6

Celebration
of the Rite of
Marriage



Section 1 The Process of Marriage Preparation

"The steps of the journey should not be rushed. This is how we mature, step by step. The time of betrothal can truly become a time of initiation, into what? Into surprise. Into the surprise of the spiritual gifts with which the Lord, through the Church, enriches the horizon of the new family that stands ready to live in his blessing."

Pope Francis, Catechesis on Engagement. (27 May 2015)

Stage 1: Initial Welcome, Listening and Discernment of Needs

1. Engaged couples make their first approach to the priest, in the parish where they live, or hope to be married. The couple making their initial enquiry are welcomed, their freedom to marry is ascertained and they are informed about the notice required in the diocese to celebrate a marriage e.g. six months. The couple must be clearly informed about the civil requirements for their marriage to take place. They are given the necessary help and attention to clarify their intention to be married in a Catholic Church within a Catholic community. A sensitive pastoral approach is required in welcoming couples who are not both Catholic, especially where one is a committed Christian of another denomination or a member of another faith or of no faith. As the Theological Preface states:

"When couples approach the Church to request the celebration of their marriage, they reveal a sign of their deepest hopes and intentions. It is an indication that they wish to celebrate their marriage in the context of the Gospel and the Church, whatever the circumstances by which they arrive and even if their path of faith has been winding and uncertain."

2. The couple are given details of marriage preparation courses available to them and encouraged to use the period before their wedding as a time of discernment. For couples who are cohabiting the marriage preparation period offers a particular opportunity - a 'stop and think' moment - to become truly open to the Church's vision for marriage.

Stage 2: Welcome in the Parish

3. The whole community has an important part to play in ensuring each couple feels welcomed and cared for at this stage in their life together. Where possible, this is an opportunity to introduce the couple to the parish community, and for the community to welcome them, pray for them, and assure them of their continuing support as they prepare for the sacrament of marriage. A simple welcome ritual could be formally celebrated at the beginning of a Sunday Eucharist in the parish. A special blessing of an engaged couple, including blessing of the engagement ring, may be used either in a setting with both families, or when couples are brought together for catechetical preparation.

"The Christian community is the home of those who believe in Jesus as the font of brotherhood among all human beings. ... In the Gospels, the assembly of Jesus takes the form of a family, a hospitable family ... And Jesus never stops accepting and speaking to everyone, even those who no longer expect to encounter God in this life. That is an important lesson for the Church! The disciples were chosen to care for this assembly, for this family of God's guests. In order to maintain this reality of the assembly of Jesus in today's situation, it is indispensable to renew the covenant between the family and the Christian community. We could say that the family and the parish are the two places where the communion of love, which finds its ultimate

source in God, takes place. ... Strengthening the bond between the family and the Christian community today is indispensable and urgent.”¹³

4. It would be worth considering as part of the accompaniment of the parish community whether other married couples in the parish could be invited to support the engaged on their journey to marriage, praying for them, and taking an interest in them.
5. The Pre-Nuptial Enquiry Form is completed (see Canons 1066-1072) and reviewed, including any need to apply for dispensations.¹⁴ Good administration will not only inform the couple of the requirements, but also reassure them that they are in good hands.

Stage 3: The Marriage Preparation Course

6. The couples enter into a period of formation and guidance, including enrolment in a marriage Preparation Course. It is important that the priest/deacon and all those directly involved in the preparation of the couple know the content of the marriage preparation course and, if possible, participate in some way.¹⁵ (See Section 3)

Stage 4: Deepening the Couple's Relationship with the Parish and their Life of Faith

“The couple can also meditate on the biblical readings and the meaningfulness of the rings they will exchange and the other signs that are part of the rite. Nor would it be good for them to arrive at the wedding without ever having prayed together, one for the other, to seek God's help in remaining faithful and generous, to ask the Lord together what he wants of them, and to consecrate their love before an image of the Virgin Mary. Those who help prepare them for marriage should help them experience these moments of prayer that can prove so beneficial.”

Amoris Laetitia #216¹⁶

7. During their Engagement period, where possible, the parish continues to build the relationship between the couple and the community of the faithful, with opportunities for the couple to develop a growing sense of belonging. The parish community may offer special blessings and prayers for the couple, in the Parish Sunday Mass, and/or in the preparation sessions, for example, a ritual welcome and a blessing of engagement rings. Support may be offered in developing spirituality as a couple, explaining the basic Gospel message and teaching on holiness in the ordinariness of married and family life, as a sign which helps the Church deepen its understanding of itself.¹⁷ A particular opportunity arises when marriages are between a Catholic and a person from another Christian denomination (over half the marriages in the Catholic Church). Interchurch issues may be addressed, looking at the specific beliefs and practices in the two traditions alongside ways of dealing with differences¹⁸

13 Pope Francis. Catechesis on the Christian Community. 9th September 2015 <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015/index.1.html>

14 Canon 1071 addresses the difficult situations where permission of the local ordinary is required for lawful Marriage to take place

15 A broad range of courses, programmes and approaches is available in individual dioceses, see www.catholicfamily.org.uk/what-we-do/Marriage/Marriage-preparation

16 © 2016 Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 00120 Citta del Vaticano

17 See Gaudium et Spes (1965) #47-52, Lumen Gentium (1964) #11, Ephesians 5:31-32; I Cor 7:7.

18 See www.interchurchfamilies.org.uk

and recognising unity. For questions arising in preparation for interreligious marriages, specialist guidance and advice is recommended.

8. Pope Francis' address to the Roman Rota in January 2016 is also worth noting here:

"It is good to state clearly that the quality of the faith is not an essential condition for marital consensus, which, according to the everlasting doctrine, can be undermined only at the natural level (see Canon 1055, paragraphs 1 and 2). In fact, the *habitus fidei* is infused at the moment of Baptism and continues to have a mysterious influence on the soul, even when the faith has not been developed and, psychologically, seems to be absent. It is not rare that the parties contracting marriage, driven to true marriage by the *instinctus naturae*, have, at the moment of the celebration, a limited awareness of the fullness of God's plan, and only later, in family life, they discover all that God the Creator and Redeemer has established for them. ..with a renewed sense of responsibility, the Church continues to propose marriage in its essential elements – offspring, the good of the spouses, unity, indissolubility, sacredness – not as an ideal for a few, despite modern models centered on the ephemeral and the transitory, but as a reality that, with the grace of Christ, can be lived by all the baptized faithful. And therefore, there is greater reason for the pastoral urgency, which involves all the structures of the Church, drives to converge towards a common attempt ordered to appropriate preparation for marriage, in a sort of new catechumenate — I stress this: in a sort of new catechumenate — so desired by some Synodal Fathers."¹⁹

Stage 5: Final Preparation for the Liturgy - Rite of Marriage

9. The final part of the immediate marriage preparation process involves bringing together all aspects of the preparation, deciding on the form and content of the Liturgy, finalising an Order of Service and reflecting more deeply about what the couple is embarking on in giving and receiving their consent, making their vows, exchanging rings. Part of this period includes reflection on the Order of Celebrating Matrimony and choosing which of the three forms of the Rite is most appropriate to the couple's situation. There should be a final check that the civil and canonical requirements have been completed, and a wedding rehearsal is arranged.

Stage 6: Celebrating the Rite of Marriage – the Wedding

10. The couple celebrates their marriage, within the Liturgy, in the presence of witnesses, their families and friends. If possible it is good to find ways for the wider parish community to be connected with the celebration, through the variety of liturgical ministries, and in the preparation of the Church. Also by communicating the good news of the wedding and asking for prayer and continuing support of the couple through parish bulletins, notice boards, social media, etc., especially because the wedding day is a significant moment of evangelisation.

Stage 7: Life as a Married Couple

11. The early days and years of marriage are a time of considerable adjustment and transition for the couple, as they grow into married life, adjustments that will continue at all stages of their marriage, from bringing children into the world, sending them on their way, caring for each other in their later years. It would be good for the parish community to support married couples at all these stages of life. Resources for this include a variety of organisations and movements, but also the gifts and experience of the people in the parish.

¹⁹ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/january/documents/papa-francesco_20160122_anno-giudiziario-rot-romana.html

“Thus, within the ecclesial community - the great family made up of Christian families - there will take place a mutual exchange of presence and help among all the families, each one putting at the service of others its own experience of life, as well as the gifts of faith and grace.” (Familiaris Consortio #69)

In addition, the parish or deanery might consider itself what it might offer to support couples e.g. regular days of reflection, anniversary liturgies, and family-friendly social events. Family life can also be affirmed and nurtured through outreach from the parish and its schools, via parenting programmes, parent-toddler groups, sacramental preparation and on-going catechesis, in tandem with easy access to resources that support growing in faith in the home, recognising and respecting the fundamental importance of relationships in family life as the first school of unconditional love, and their presence as a witness to love within the wider parish community. The couples' and families' increased contact with the rest of the faithful will have a life-giving impact in the community.

Section 2 Marriage Preparation Practices

“The love of God created the concrete conditions for an irrevocable covenant, one that is strong and lasting. The covenant of love between man and woman — a covenant for life — cannot be improvised. It isn’t made up one day to the next. There is no ‘marriage express’: one needs to work on love, one needs to walk. The covenant of love between man and woman is something learned and refined. I venture to say it is a covenant carefully crafted. To make two lives one is almost a miracle of freedom and the heart entrusted to faith. Pre-marriage courses are a special expression of preparation. And we see so many couples, who perhaps come to the course somewhat reluctantly. But afterwards they are happy and grateful, because they have found there the opportunity — sometimes the only one — to reflect on their experience in non-trivial terms.”

Pope Francis, Catechesis on Engagement. (May 27th 2015)²⁰

Recommendations for Best Practice

1. Recognising that marriage preparation is a broad process (as outlined in Section 1 above), which attempts to meet the diverse needs and expectations of couples, a flexible approach that is both pastoral and pragmatic is recommended. Any delivery method should aim to integrate the theological-pastoral rationale with the relational-religious components of a marriage preparation programme, within the context of the parish community. It is important to consider who will deliver the preparation at each stage, and how they will deliver it.
2. Research highlights the significance of the role of the priest in every marriage preparation process. Marriage preparation should ideally be delivered by a team comprising both clergy and lay people, perhaps formed across a deanery or pastoral area. The addition of parish couple mentors is encouraged, as is engaging the energies of the wider community, and offering continuing support during and after marriage preparation. Potential marriage preparation providers may be identified from within parish/deanery communities, and invited to commit to training for this ministry.
3. There is no standard length of programme. The focus is on the couple and their needs, allowing fully adequate time for teaching, discussion, and space to engage with the topics offered, as well as to think about their faith, and to explore the Sacrament of marriage in the context of its place in the life of the wider Christian community. While it is not always practical, research indicates that a marriage preparation course, (as an integral part of the whole marriage preparation process) is more effective when spread over several sessions.²¹
4. If the couple is unable to attend a course due to difficult personal circumstances (e.g. employment away; in the military or public services, working shifts/on call; a member of the travelling community; other special needs) then alternative arrangements should be made. These might include use of an on-line inventory-based assessment (including provision for couples in different locations), with follow up either face-to-face or via the internet with an experienced provider. Or it could be arranged for the couple to receive marriage preparation in a different geographical area from that in which they will be married.

Stages of Delivery

(i) Initial Welcome

- I clergy: listen, assess couple situation/hopes; first opportunity to pray with/for them; introduce couple to expectations of Church.

20 <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015.index.2.html>

21 Coleman, L., 2012. Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Community, London: One Plus One. p.4

- II Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple: a simple rite for optional use in the home on or near the occasion of engagement, perhaps at a family meal.²²
- III administration: including outline of core content of a marriage preparation course, and dates of availability of courses; first paperwork completed.

(ii) Parish Welcome - Introductions

- I environment/welcoming space/liturgy, e.g. The Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple;
- II the parishioners/assembly/community life/Sunday Liturgy;
- III introduction to couple mentors;
- IV other couples and families.

(iii) Marriage Preparation Course/Programme

- I consider what this will comprise: the minimum number of facilitated hours and sessions with trained providers;
 - a. content and form of programme (relationship/religious/spiritual dimensions);
 - b. face to face, possibly complemented by 'relationship quality' on-line assessment;
 - c. a space that feels free and safe to reflect, discuss, and learn together;
- II clergy, and couple mentors: available for conversation, friendship, listening, discernment.

(iv) Deepening the Experience of Parish

- I Sunday Mass – inclusion of blessings and special prayers for engaged couple;
- II invitations to parish events (including coffee after Mass, socials etc.);
- III support with developing spirituality (couple mentors and others in conversation).

(v) Preparation for the Rite of Marriage – active involvement of the couple

- I clergy & couple mentors: the couple (who establish a partnership of the whole of life between themselves);
 - a. step-by-step through the rite, the vows, the scripture, the symbols;
 - b. guidance for choice of appropriate form of rite, options for scripture (Old Testament, New Testament and Gospel) and music (what and when);
 - c. final paperwork – canonical/legal registration of marriage/Registrar for the Wedding.
- II parish liturgists:
 - a. ministries (music, Word (including Prayer of the Faithful), Communion, welcomers, etc.)
- III environment – welcoming space:
 - a. sacristan, cleaners, flowers/flower arrangers;
 - b. parish guide on photographs/video recording, and templates/ printing of Orders of Service.
- IV rehearsal - couple, family, ministers.

22 See Order of Celebrating Matrimony, Appendix II

(vi) Celebration of the Rite – the Wedding Day

- I welcome - the couple, family/friends. (Community opportunity to witness).
- II experience the mystery of the Liturgy itself.

(vii) Married Life - the lived experience

- I opportunity to reflect back on the wedding;
- II newly marrieds – celebrations in the parish; follow up date;
- III meeting other couples and families – integration into community life;
- IV Marriage enrichment opportunities (liturgical/spiritual/social/relational);
- V parenting programmes; parent-toddler groups, and links with Catholic schools;
- VI sacramental preparation for baptism.

Section 3 Content of Marriage Preparation Programmes

“The timely preparation of engaged couples by the parish community should also assist them to recognize eventual problems and risks. In this way, they can come to realize the wisdom of breaking off a relationship whose failure and painful aftermath can be foreseen...., they should be strongly encouraged to discuss what each expects from marriage, what they understand by love and commitment, what each wants from the other and what kind of life they would like to build together. ... Both short-term and long-term marriage preparation should ensure that the couple do not view the wedding ceremony as the end of the road, but instead embark upon marriage as a lifelong calling based on a firm and realistic decision to face all trials and difficult moments together. The pastoral care of engaged and married couples should be centred on the marriage bond, assisting couples not only to deepen their love but also to overcome problems and difficulties. This involves not only helping them to accept the Church’s teaching and to have recourse to her valuable resources, but also offering practical programmes, sound advice, proven strategies and psychological guidance. All this calls for a pedagogy of love, attuned to the feelings and needs of young people and capable of helping them to grow interiorly. Marriage preparation should also provide couples with the names of places, people and services to which they can turn for help when problems arise. It is also important to remind them of the availability of the sacrament of Reconciliation, which allows them to bring their sins and past mistakes, and their relationship itself, before God, and to receive in turn his merciful forgiveness and healing strength.” *Amoris Laetitia* #210-211

“The meaning of the promise and the nature of the vow should have a central place in all marriage Preparation programmes. It is here that relational and spiritual dimensions of the conjugal union interpenetrate and interact with each other. To make couples understand this nodal point of their relationship is probably the best way to help couples work on their relationship and (re)discover its transcendent dimension. Equal priority should be given to talking about the *rite of marriage* which the couples are going to celebrate as completion of the marriage Preparation... If it is true that contemporary couples put their hope in some kind of “transformative power” to support their longing and engagement for a stable and happy marriage (Chappell, 2009), the marital rite with its complementary elements of human promise and divine blessing is the right place to raise the issue of divine provision for the human endeavour of lifelong loving (Fuchs, 2009).” (Knieps, 2012, p21)

1. The content of marriage preparation ensures that the couple have the opportunity to explore key areas in advance of their wedding so that they can prepare to engage fully in the lived experience of marriage as a life-long, faithful, and fruitful partnership, communicating daily: ‘I love you; I am sorry, please forgive me; thank you.’²³ At parish and diocesan level, a range of programmes or courses are available, with common core content woven together in various ways. The choice of programme will usually be driven by local availability, but include the inventory-based on-line assessments e.g. FOCCUS and REFOCUSS, or Prepare Enrich.
2. The Coleman Report (2012) noted that:

“the content of marriage preparation replicates much of that shown to be effective in other marriage preparation and relationship education programmes i.e. relationship knowledge, communication skills (including dealing with conflict) and relationship quality (addressing those factors which affect quality such as coping skills, life

23 Pope Francis. Address to Families, Pilgrimage for the Year of Faith 2013

transitions, factors protecting and sustaining relationships etc.). It is not necessary, therefore, to substantially overhaul the content delivered in the majority of programmes.”²⁴

3. However, Coleman also noted that “the wide variety of material delivered in the marriage preparation courses indicates there is no standard content. It is recommended that providers are given more guidance on the essential content to be delivered, in the form of a core curriculum.” The core content of programmes is therefore recommended as follows:

Expectations of Marriage

- I What each of the couple bring to the relationship – their relational capacity.
- II Influences of family of origin – what each wants to bring to the new, what each wishes to leave behind or adapt.
- III Faith life and faith background.
- IV Innate assumptions (e.g. to parenting).

Uniqueness of Married Love

- I Companionship/soul mate – being unconditionally loved, accepted as ‘you’.
- II Nurturing intimacy, physical/sexual love and the gift of the sexual relationship.
- III How married love grows.
- IV Power of affirmation, appreciation, giving and receiving forgiveness.
- V Prioritising the couple relationship.
- VI Theology of the Body.

The Sacrament of Marriage and the Liturgy to Celebrate it

- I The Sacrament of marriage,²⁵ ideally starting from the provider’s own faith experience, encouraging dialogue and search for meaning of the sacrament, communicating its relevance for the couple’s relationship, drawing on the wealth of Church teaching, with specific reference to Scripture.²⁶
- II Vocational nature of marriage and the grace of the sacrament – God’s call, human promise, divine blessing, and promise to be with them and strengthen them (CCC 1642). Marriage is a particular way of living out our baptismal call to holiness, of living out our God-given purpose as a married couple.²⁷
- III The Rite of marriage: meaning in the shape, signs, and symbols of the Liturgy. (The ritual is very significant, particularly for couples who have little contact with the Church.)²⁸ The

24 Coleman, L. 2012. Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Community: An Independent Assessment of Evaluation Data. London: One Plus One. P.9.

25 See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part Two, Section Two, Article 7, 1601-1666; The Order of Celebrating Matrimony

26 CCC 1612-1617 for most Scripture references

27 Our God-Given Purpose, The National Vocations Framework. CBCEW 2016

28 Knieps-Port Le Roi, T. 2012. The Catholic Marriage Preparation Survey 2010: Some Observations, Reflections and Recommendations from a Theological and Pastoral Perspective. p.21 Available at: <http://www.catholicfamily.org>.

couple, as ministers of the sacrament according to our Roman Catholic tradition, are actively involved in preparing the Liturgy. It is celebrated in the context of the active participation of the witnessing community.

- IV Significance of the marriage Vows: the meaning of the promise and exchange of mutual consent and personal commitment to a loving, faithful, exclusive, fruitful partnership of the whole of life, and the openness to fertility, and welcoming and educating children (CCC 1652). For those who find they are unable to have children, the Church affirms their married life together as “full of meaning in both human and Christian terms – radiating a fruitfulness of charity, hospitality and sacrifice.” (CCC 1654)
- V The sign of marriage: the love between the married couple in the life of the community, making the love and faithfulness of God really present, a sign of Christ’s love for the Church.
- VI The sacramentality of marriage : living the sacrament in the ups and downs of daily life, where God as love is present and revealed in the ordinariness, in mutuality, sharing, service, reconciliation and celebration.
- VII Family as domestic church, the smallest but most essential cell of the Body of Christ which is the Church; living their common life, learning to pray together, becoming the first teachers of their children in the ways of faith and reaching out to those in need.²⁹

Communication

- I Talking and listening with understanding (personality, circumstances, family of origin, expressing feelings).
- II Barriers (lack of time, fears of misunderstanding, holding on to hurt, not listening).
- III Conflict resolution (what leads to conflict, dealing with anger, behaviour that has negative impact on relationship and self-esteem, win-win solutions).
- IV Managing marital finances.

Family Life

- I Responsible parenting, fertility awareness and natural family planning.
- II The gift of children.
- III Information/tasters: parenting course, parent toddler groups, spirituality support for families.
- IV Parish support in difficult times including signposting to relationship counselling; help for those vulnerable to or suffering from domestic abuse.

Special Circumstances

- I Canonical and pastoral issues for those entering second marriage (after death, divorce and annulment).

uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/catholic-Marriage-preparation-survey-2010.pdf

29 See www.catholicfamily.org.uk for links to resources in support of families, especially Home is a Holy Place, which could inform marriage preparation ministry.

- II Sensitivity and awareness to mixed marriages, especially where both spouses are committed to their particular Christian communities (interchurch marriages).
- III interreligious marriages.
- IV Marriages with one or both spouses with any form of special need.

Section 4 Training, Development and Support for Marriage Preparation Providers

“The main contribution to the pastoral care of families is offered by the parish, which is the family of families, where small communities, ecclesial movements and associations live in harmony.’ Along with a pastoral outreach aimed specifically at families, this shows the need for ‘a more adequate formation... of priests, deacons, men and women religious, catechists and other pastoral workers.’”

Amoris Laetitia #202

Assumptions

- I That all those, lay and clergy, involved in marriage preparation are enablers and not experts or counsellors. Ideally, marriage preparation is offered by the whole community, in partnership with providers.
- II There is no one-size-fits-all training and development programme for parishes. These general guidelines are adaptable to the needs of parishes across the spectrum, from those who celebrate many marriages, and whose preparation is integral to the life of the parish, to the more ad hoc approach where the parish supports marriage, but have few or no couples presenting for marriage preparation in their particular church each year.
- III That the marriage Preparation process is conducted in accordance with (a) Diocesan policies for Safeguarding (e.g. if there is any involvement of children or vulnerable adults) and that training includes awareness of both safeguarding and the duty of care (i.e. the implicit responsibilities held by individuals towards others) with particular awareness of the signs of domestic abuse and appropriate responses.
- IV That a Diocese, or groups of local parishes, establishes a network of marriage preparation providers, as a vehicle for learning from them, organising a range of development and support activities according to local needs.

Relational and Religious Dimensions

Training for all those involved in the ministry of marriage preparation focuses on both the relational and the religious dimensions, including elements of theological, spiritual and pastoral formation. This heightens awareness that the sacramental, spiritual and liturgical aspects are *integral* to Catholic marriage Preparation, and are interacting constantly with the interpersonal dimensions.

Selection

The following guidelines aim to ensure that all those who deliver marriage preparation programmes are appropriately selected, trained, and equipped with the confidence to facilitate programme sessions, and to accompany couples as they prepare for marriage. All providers should have on-going development opportunities, and be supported by a network of fellow-providers with whom to share experiences and best practice. Training and support should also be available for those who wish to accompany couples as couple mentors. Clergy training and continuing formation needs must also inform this broader effort to provide “a more adequate formation... of priests, deacons, men and women religious, catechists and other pastoral workers.” (Amoris Laetitia #202)

- I **Training:** the initial induction/preparation of providers towards their becoming confident and capable of engaging well with couples attending marriage preparation. Initial training is part of the selection process through which the provider's suitability for the role is discerned, both by themselves and by the trainer.
- II **Development:** On-going provision of opportunities for providers to sustain and further improve their skills, based on their experience of delivering sessions in the marriage preparation programme, i.e. to engage in reflective practice, what has worked well for them, and what has not gone so well, and to engage in further training that will enhance their skills accordingly.
- III **Support:** This includes provision of care (offered in various forms) for providers, particularly in case of difficult disclosures or other problems during sessions. It means providing opportunities for providers to meet and be mutually supportive, as well as to share best practice and experiences of the programmes.

Training for providers of programmes/courses

1. The skills and competences required of a marriage preparation provider naturally comprise the *selection criteria* by which volunteers are identified for this important work. These include:
 - I An enthusiasm for marriage, and for sharing the faith of the Church in marriage, with an understanding of relationships gained through his or her own life experience;
 - II A warm and approachable personality, with sensitivity to the hopes and anxieties of couples preparing for marriage;
 - III An awareness of her or his own principles and values around, for example, marriage, faith and sex, and the ability to initiate conversation and respond to questions on these personal beliefs and views;
 - IV Open and non-judgmental attitudes, with an ability to respect confidences;
 - V Listening and relational skills, including the ability to draw people out when working with groups;
 - VI An ability to work in a team with others, whether as an individual or part of a married couple (if both wish to be involved in this ministry);
 - VII A willingness to learn, to grow and change;
 - VIII Presentation and facilitation skills;
 - IX Gentle confidence as a mentor.
2. Besides these skills and competencies it is expected that marriage preparation providers develop a body of knowledge. This indicates the basis for their initial training and ongoing development:
 - I The purpose of marriage in a Catholic Christian context;³⁰
 - II Understanding Catholic teaching on the sacrament of marriage;
 - III Responsible parenting and fertility awareness;

30 See *Amoris Laetitia*, especially Chapter Three: Looking to Jesus: the Vocation of the Family

- IV Canon Law references to marriage, for example, marriage when one partner is not Catholic, and the sensitive approach required in order to encourage and facilitate the continued practice of the faith by the Catholic spouse and the children; dispensations; the promise;
 - V Relationship theory, communication and conflict resolution;
 - VI Listening skills and how to model these as a provider;
 - VII Facilitation and management of group dynamics.
3. Practical training in the following aspects of marriage preparation is also desirable:
- I Handling situations when one partner in the couple clearly does not wish to participate;
 - II Customising the programme content, with personal illustrations where appropriate;
 - III Practicing delivery of the programme;
 - IV Venue, facilities, and resource issues.
4. Much of the provider training will be specific to the particular programme in use in the parish, local pastoral area or diocese. It would be useful to consider training at diocesan level on the generic aspects, such as Catholic teaching on the Sacrament of marriage, and the basic psychology of intimate relationships. An online formation programme is currently being developed by the Bishops' Conference which will meet some of these formation needs.

Support for Couple Mentors

The marriage preparation team often includes a supportive individual or couple, sometimes referred to as the couple mentor(s), whose role is one of welcome and friendly companionship. Couple mentors offer accompaniment, in conversation with the engaged couple, listening and speaking very much from their own experience of marriage. If appropriate, the provider training could be usefully adapted for training of couple mentors or befrienders, for example, offering listening skills training, and relationship quality material, as well as catechesis on marriage and family life.

Continuing Development and Support

So that a vibrant, relevant and high quality marriage preparation ministry can be maintained, all members of the team, lay and clergy, providers and couple mentors, are actively encouraged and offered opportunities (with parish and diocesan support) to commit to the continuing development of their knowledge, skills, and where appropriate, marital spirituality. This might include:

- I Undertaking some form of annual continuing professional development through lectures, talks, retreats, or guided study;
- II Engaging with networks of other marriage preparation teams to share good practice and offer peer support;
- III Taking time to reflect on the conclusion of each programme on what worked well or not so well and receiving feedback from other team members as appropriate;
- IV Meeting regularly together as a whole team, clergy and lay, to share how the marriage preparation process is going, to share reflections on practice and to identify where improvements or changes might be made;
- V Dedicating time to their own relationships, taking advantage of any opportunities for relationship enrichment or spiritual direction.

Section 5 Understanding the Value of Marriage Ministry in the Parish

“The complexity of today’s society and the challenges faced by the family require a greater effort on the part of the whole Christian community in preparing those who are about to be married.”

Amoris Laetitia #206

Why Evaluate?

1. The sacrament of marriage, the love of a couple and the emergence of families are all important in the life of the church and therefore the parish needs to assess and reflect on how it is making that a reality. How can the parish identify ways that it can and does have an impact on the lives of couples and families? How does the parish celebrate the gift that couples and families are in the life of the community?

2. The sorts of questions an evaluative process will ask are:

What does ‘success’ look like? How might we assess the impact of our efforts at each step in the marriage preparation process? What support are we offering to couples and families in living their common life, learning to pray together, becoming the first teachers of their children in the ways of faith and reaching out to those in need?

Evaluation, in the context of marriage preparation at parish and diocesan level goes beyond the initial feedback received from couples following a programme. All marriage preparation and marriage support strategies can be evaluated, to inform further development of family ministry in the parish and the diocese.

Evaluation of Process and Programme Content

1. Evaluation of the content of a marriage preparation process focusses on two complementary dimensions:
 - I Understanding and expression of the Church’s vision of marriage.
 - II Relationship quality and stability.
2. An assessment will consider whether expectations have been met for the couples, and for the Church. This involves ascertaining what these expectations are prior to marriage preparation, including the reasons for getting married, and for doing so in a Catholic Church. Ideally evaluation will include a further assessment during the early years of marriage as to the usefulness of the tools/skills gained through preparation, and how this continues to help the couple build a strong, healthy marriage. It would also include an assessment of how marriage preparation and enrichment impact on the life of the community.

Methods: Strengths and Limitations of an Evaluation Process

- I **A range of existing validated measures** are available to evaluate marriage preparation programmes which primarily focus on relationship quality parameters (e.g. Quality of marriage Index or QMI currently used by marriage Care). These are a useful part of the process, but will not evaluate the broader and longer term impact of marriage preparation, particularly the ecclesial dimension.

- II For this, some **qualitative data** should be gathered to give some indication as to how well providers have communicated Church teaching and how well couples have received it. For example, 'What difference has marriage preparation in the Church context made to your faith in Christ?' 'How has your understanding of marriage as a sacrament increased?'
- III **Data collection** will always be limited and never perfect. Evaluation should not be burdensome for respondents or administrators.
- IV If possible the experience of marriage preparation should be **evaluated over a longer time period**, offering several points of contact following the programme. Clearly this will depend on having continuing points of contact with the couples. The couple mentor could play a role in gathering feedback in a relaxed and friendly manner. As a point of good practice, wherever and whenever a newly married couple goes to church, this is an opportunity to welcome and listen to their experience of marriage preparation, and their needs now – whether they were prepared there or not. This longer-term evaluation will continue to enrich what a parish offers for present and future couples.

Evaluation of Remote Marriage Preparation Strategies

"Learning to love someone does not happen automatically, nor can it be taught in a workshop just prior to the celebration of marriage. For every couple, marriage preparation begins at birth. What they received from their family should prepare them to know themselves and to make a full and definitive commitment. Those best prepared for marriage are probably those who learned what Christian marriage is from their own parents, who chose each other unconditionally and daily renew this decision." Amoris Laetitia #208

Evaluation of the effectiveness of remote marriage preparation, for infants, children, and adolescents growing to adulthood, rests within the context of the continuing self-assessment of the parish and its core mission. For example, in what ways are the parish recognising, naming and resourcing families as the first, most basic 'school of love', the place of essential first experience of relationship and relationship education, upon which all later education, catechesis and marriage preparation is built? In what ways are the parish building a higher profile for marriage preparation and marriage enrichment in the parish? How are the parish communicating respect and value for the importance of marriage in their community? What is the quality of the welcome, listening, and inclusive nature of the parish environment? How are the parish proclaiming the basic Gospel message with families? Practically, how does the parish focus on relationships, the celebration of good liturgy, and an outward-looking service? How many couples and families are involved in the life of the parish, and what do they bring to the parish? The parish can also engage in home-parish-school events/formation sessions that include all generations, affirming the values of marriage and family, growing together, reflecting on experience, and sharing the meaning of marriage and what being 'spiritual leaders in the home' entails.

See Appendix 4 'Thinking about the Impact of marriage preparation' for ideas on Parish or Diocesan Evaluation of the longer-term impact on the life of the community of good practice in marriage preparation and marriage support.

Section 6 Sharing the Good News about Marriage Preparation

“What we need is a more responsible and generous effort to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family, and in this way to help men and women better to respond to the grace that God offers them.”

Amoris Laetitia #35

Benefits

1. The 2011 Coleman report on marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church in England & Wales concludes with a strong recommendation regarding communicating the benefits of marriage preparation, for the couple, the Church, and wider society. In brief, church documents and research evidence from international and local studies indicate the very positive impact of marriage preparation:
 - I **For the couple:** improved relationship quality; improved well-being; improved relational capacity for the future; more open to asking for help sooner; opportunity to reflect on the meaning of their marriage vows.
 - II **For the Church:** in its careful and generous welcome of couples, in the spirit of the Gospel and the context of the community, the church offers the possibility of a lifetime of support and engagement for each couple. The Church has the opportunity to share its teaching on the sacrament of marriage, deepen awareness of marriage as a vocation, affirm marriage, and both learn from and celebrate the couples' love as a gift, a witness to the love of God, in the life and mission of the Church, in and for the world.
 - III **For society:** the marriage relationship enriches not only the couple, their children, their families and communities, but also society as a whole. By engaging in marriage preparation, improving their skills in communication and management of conflict, making it more likely for a couple to seek support in hard times, couples can build stronger more lasting relationships. Conversely, without good preparation and continuing support, if relationships deteriorate or are poor, the cost of family breakdown impacts on adult and child mental health, heart disease, obesity, and families being more likely to need financial assistance from the State.³¹
2. These benefits form the essential thrust for all publicity and promotion to be widely communicated, locally and nationally (see Section 7: Increasing Access) to encourage:
 - I more couples to take part;
 - II more volunteers to train for parish marriage ministry;
 - III more people to train as marriage preparation course providers.

Communication between Key Stakeholders

As well as communicating the benefits, Coleman makes a further strong recommendation to improve communications between all those involved, nationally and within diocesan structures, between the diocese, its parishes, and the providers of specific marriage preparation programmes.

³¹ In 2012, relationship breakdown cost the State between £44bn (Relationship Foundation) and £46bn (Office for National Statistics).

This not only helps key people, both clergy and lay, to be aware of the developments in marriage preparation, but also encourages collaboration in full support of those who seek to provide excellence in this vital ministry to couples.

Communication through Developing Local Framework of Provision

1. Good communication between all involved will also help in the development of a diocesan policy on the provision of marriage preparation, built on trust and good will, developing strong working partnerships that encourage access to marriage preparation, and serve both the needs of the couples and the parish communities.
2. In 2010, detailed research was carried out into marriage Preparation provision, establishing which programmes were available across the dioceses of England & Wales. Marriage Care continues to be the largest single organisation involved in marriage preparation, in both the training of providers and the delivery of programmes and has much important learning to share about the quality of their provision and provider recruitment. Some dioceses have developed their own marriage preparation courses, or adopted newly developed programmes such as Engage; some promote Engaged Encounter weekends. There is a growing acceptance that a high quality marriage preparation course can be delivered locally as part of the wider preparation for marriage offered by parishes, pastoral areas and dioceses. Differences in faith, culture, nationality, as well as pressures of work and family commitments mean an increasingly flexible response is needed. (See www.catholicfamily.org.uk for links to courses).

In the Appendices

The following resources are available to support sharing the good news about marriage preparation, good working partnerships, and building a strategy for local provision:

- Appendix 4: Benefits of marriage preparation.
- Appendix 6: Planning a meeting to develop local marriage preparation provision.
- Appendix 7: Mapping existing local provision.

Section 7 Making Marriage Preparation Programmes More Widely Available

1. Current estimates are that around 40-50% of couples access a formal programme of marriage preparation – a course - in addition to the canonically required preparation provided by clergy. In order to ensure healthy provision of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church in England and Wales, and to provide the best possible support for couples in their married life, we want to recruit more marriage preparation providers and increase the number of programmes available.
2. Also because these Guidelines envisage a much broader process of marriage preparation and ongoing support for marriage and family life within the parish we need to focus on the following:
 - I training more providers;
 - II encouraging and informing clergy and seminarians;
 - III referring more couples to formal preparation programmes;
 - IV increasing awareness of the benefits of marriage preparation;
 - V developing a greater sense of parish responsibility;
 - VI improving strategic planning and publicity.

The following strategies are recommended:

A Diocesan Audit

It is recommended that dioceses audit and map existing provision of marriage preparation courses (see Appendix 7 for a suggested template which could be sent out to all parishes and collated by the diocese). Where this has already been done, a further audit might be necessary to update local data.

Recruiting More Providers

It is recommended that more course providers are recruited and trained, ensuring a good geographical spread within a diocese, and to maintain support and regular professional development for them. It is worth noting that the research indicates that 48% of providers are recruited by word of mouth, and are often those who have gone through marriage preparation themselves, found it to be positive and useful, and are happy to share their experiences with others.

Facilitating Collaboration

Given **the mandatory nature of marriage preparation**³² dioceses may find it useful to create a strategy or process which fosters the co-responsibility of clergy and laity in their local setting. Such

32 Canon 1063: 2 Pastors of souls are obliged to take care that their ecclesiastical community offers the Christian faithful the assistance by which the matrimonial state is preserved in a Christian spirit and advances in perfection. This assistance must be offered especially by (1) preaching about the meaning of Christian marriage and the function of Christian spouses and parents and (2) personal preparation to enter marriage, which disposes the spouses to the holiness and duties of their new state.

The majority opinion of respondents in the marriage preparation survey 2010 said that marriage preparation courses should be mandatory and, coming from the bishops, would improve take-up of marriage preparation. (Executive Summary, marriage Preparation in the Catholic Community, Assessment of Data, 2012).

a strategy offers a way for the local parishes, working together with trained marriage preparation providers, perhaps from national organisations, towards providing a comprehensive preparation for couples. (See Appendix 6 for a model for developing a local strategy, for use at parish, deanery/pastoral area or diocesan setting).

Promoting Marriage Preparation

Publicity and promotion of the vital importance and the benefits of marriage preparation for the couples, the Church and the wider society, and how and where to access marriage preparation, should be made a priority. (See Section 6 'Sharing the Good News' and Appendix 4 Benefits of marriage Preparation)

Creating Welcome Packs

At diocesan and/or parish level, a welcome pack should be available for all couples seeking marriage, with a warm, inviting introduction, and a variety of information leaflets, including for example, the benefits of marriage preparation, the hopes and expectations of the couple and the Church, how to make contact with the parish, who the key people are, what the process involves, and an outline of content of the programme. In addition, on-line welcome and access to the same information is vital, via parish and diocesan websites.

Post-Wedding Follow Up

The following paragraphs from *Amoris Laetitia* address the support of newly married couples:

- 223.** The Synod Fathers observed that “the initial years of marriage are a vital and sensitive period during which couples become more aware of the challenges and meaning of married life. Consequently, pastoral accompaniment needs to go beyond the actual celebration of the sacrament (*Familiaris Consortio*, Part III). In this regard, experienced couples have an important role to play. The parish is a place where such experienced couples can help younger couples, with the eventual cooperation of associations, ecclesial movements and new communities.
- 224.** This process takes time. Love needs time and space; everything else is secondary. Time is needed to talk things over, to embrace leisurely, to share plans, to listen to one other and gaze in each other’s eyes, to appreciate one another and to build a stronger relationship. Sometimes the frenetic pace of our society and the pressures of the workplace create problems. At other times, the problem is the lack of quality time together, sharing the same room without one even noticing the other. Pastoral workers and groups of married people should think of ways to help young or vulnerable couples to make the most of those moments, to be present to one another, even by sharing moments of meaningful silence.
- 225.** Couples who have learned how to do this well can share some practical suggestions which they have found useful: planning free time together, moments of recreation with the children, different ways of celebrating important events, shared opportunities for spiritual growth. They can also provide resources that help young married couples to make those moments meaningful and loving, and thus to improve their communication. This is extremely important for the stage when the novelty of marriage has worn off. Once a couple no longer knows how to spend time together, one or both of them will end up taking refuge in gadgets, finding other commitments, seeking the embrace of another, or simply looking for ways to flee what has become an uncomfortable closeness.

- 226.** Young married couples should be encouraged to develop a routine that gives a healthy sense of closeness and stability through shared daily rituals. These could include a morning kiss, an evening blessing, waiting at the door to welcome each other home, taking trips together and sharing household chores. Yet it also helps to break the routine with a party, and to enjoy family celebrations of anniversaries and special events. We need these moments of cherishing God's gifts and renewing our zest for life. As long as we can celebrate, we are able to rekindle our love, to free it from monotony and to colour our daily routine with hope.

It would be good if couples who have received marriage preparation receive ongoing support and follow up by the parish via newsletters, personal contact/email/cards, reunions, liturgies. This encourages awareness, spreads the good news of preparation and support being available, and nurtures future providers.

Special Circumstances

Care should be taken to ensure access to marriage preparation for couples in particular situations or circumstances, offering a flexible, pastoral response. For example, for those doing shift work or who have difficult work schedules, those involved in the military, or members of a traveller community. Also important is the need to consider how best to prepare for marriage those with intellectual disabilities.

The Role of Remote Preparation & Marriage Education

In the context of encouraging all baptised children and adults to grow in their sense of vocation as loved children of God and disciples of Christ, families, parishes and schools each have a distinct and vital role and responsibility in offering their own particular witness. From the very earliest years, children can begin to discern the dignity of their unique purpose in life.

- a. There is an increasing awareness of the importance of the early years' experience in the home in terms of children's development, and the ways in which parents contribute to their children's growth in faith and relationships, in the loving, forgiving, and sacrificing involved in the everyday joys and challenges of family life.
- b. Schools are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of remote preparation for marriage, and relationship education is part of every school curriculum, from early years onwards. It is recommended that modules on relationship education are regularly reviewed, to include up to date material on marriage preparation. Members of local marriage preparation teams might be trained and encouraged to talk about their ministry in primary and secondary school settings. Alternatively, married couples can offer to share their experience of marriage e.g. via The Explore Experience.
- c. There is a need to continue to raise awareness in parishes of the importance of welcoming and supporting families, and particularly couples seeking marriage preparation. This is something that can be transmitted in a variety of ways. Seeing and hearing that marriage is valued, through the environment, the welcome of couples and families, the resourcing and affirmation of parents as first teachers of their children, with parent-toddler groups, and parenting programmes; inclusion in the liturgy, welcome packs, scripture resources, prayers, signs, symbols, say strongly 'We are a parish that believes in marriage and family life', and is an important means of providing remote marriage preparation.

Section 8 What to do with these Guidelines

These are some initial ideas for how to use these Guidelines.

Within a Parish or Deanery/Pastoral Area

1. Engage as many people as possible in thinking about ways in which the ministry of marriage preparation can be developed and integrated into the life of the local community. You may wish to have an open event, such as that described in Appendix 6, ensuring that you also invite marriage preparation providers to be part of the conversation.
2. From this event, invite people (clergy and lay, potential course facilitators and potential couple mentors), who are enthusiastic and willing, to be part of a small local group with responsibility for moving forward with marriage preparation.
3. Offer this group some appropriate theological, spiritual and practical formation, to inform and build confidence, and encourage reflection on why marriage preparation is important.
4. Part of the emerging plans might include a decision to recognise and celebrate marriage preparation, and continuing support for married life, in a variety of ways locally, connecting in with diocesan events for family life too.
5. Training implications will also become a priority. The guidelines can help with ideas. For example, training in the various roles: course facilitators, clergy, lay mentors, and the wider community.
6. Gather the parish/deanery marriage preparation providers (clergy and lay) together and discuss the Guidelines. What is already working well? What might be done differently, if anything? Try not to be overwhelmed if it all seems a lot to take in. Small steps can be the most effective, if properly considered and planned.
7. Think about auditing marriage preparation in the parish. Again it's important not to feel overwhelmed, but the process outlined in Appendix 7 might alert the parish team to something that can be done differently without too much effort.
8. Consider writing a local marriage preparation policy in the light of these Guidelines. What points from this document are worth incorporating? Involve the wider parish in the deliberations, if possible.
9. Celebrate the good news about marriage and marriage preparation drawing on the Guidelines. An annual opportunity to give thanks for the graces of marriage and the ministry to marriage is a regular feature in many dioceses and parishes.
10. Consider what additional resources your parish needs in order to serve marriage well. Contact your diocesan coordinator for marriage and family life (if you have one) or adult formation advisor for support. A list of diocesan coordinators is available online at www.familias-ew.org.uk
11. Invite one of the major marriage preparation provider organisations in to give a talk to the parish about their work. Raise money to support their work of training providers and developing their ministry.
12. Pray for marriage, for engaged and married couples and all those involved in marriage ministries.

For Diocesan Teams

1. Develop a collaborative marriage preparation team or group with clergy and lay people from across the diocese.
2. Encourage inter-departmental collaboration (e.g. Adult formation, Evangelisation and Catechesis, Liturgy, marriage and Family Life, On-Going Formation of Clergy, and Education) to give some priority to the theology, understanding and pastoral skills needed for marriage preparation ministry (remote, proximate and immediate), and adopt an inter-departmental approach to training requirements for both clergy and lay roles.
3. Reflect on the guidelines and see how they might be integrated in your own guidelines for marriage preparation, or be a tool for developing your own diocesan approach to marriage preparation, describing what it looks like in practice, and where appropriate, incorporate this within a diocesan development plan.
4. Encourage opportunities for diocesan events, for example a diocesan celebration or festival of marriage and marriage preparation (e.g. an event described in Appendix 6 of the guidelines, or something more imaginative) to celebrate and develop diocesan-wide provision. This could include listening to the experience of clergy and lay providers, followed by reflection and analysis (for example, of the factors which encourage and those that discourage) discerning the implications, and prioritising goals.
5. Read the reports on marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church in England and Wales – find them here: www.catholicfamily.org.uk/what-we-do/marriage/guidelines-for-marriage-preparation.

Special Thanks

These guidelines would not have been possible without the combined efforts over several years of a good number of people. These especially include the networks of marriage preparation provider organisations and the diocesan coordinators of family ministry. Without Amanda Cosfol and Erik Bock, project office interns from the University of Notre Dame, the 2010 survey could not have been administered. Terry Prendergast, Bridie Collins, Lisette Blanchet-Ball, Phil Butcher, Joy Wanless, Keith Chappell and Patrick Haynes all helped to plan the national marriage preparation conference in 2011. We are grateful to Bishop Richard Moth for his conference input and to Francis Davis for facilitating the event. Lester Coleman and Thomas Knieps-Port Le Roi provided expert input at a critical stage in 2012.

Edmund Adamus (Archdiocese of Westminster), Lisette Blanchet-Ball (Archdiocese of Southwark), Fr Tim Buckley, CSsR (parish priest, Liverpool Archdiocese), Philip Butcher (Diocese of Brentwood), Keith Chappell (Maryvale Institute), Fr Eddie Clare (Archdiocese of Birmingham), Bridie Collins (Marriage Care), Paul & Lucy Docherty (Association of Interchurch Families), Fr Bartłomiej Dudek (parish priest, Archdiocese of Southwark), Maggie Hase (Marriage Care), Margaret Kay (Marriage Care), Rev Deacon Peter Lavery (Diocese of Hexham & Newcastle), Dr Evleen Mann (Fertility Practitioner), Fr Duncan McVicar (Schoenstatt programme, Diocese of Salford), Mark Molden (CEO, Marriage Care), Paul & Annette O'Beirne (Love and Cherish), Maureen O'Brien (FAMILIAS and Archdiocese of Liverpool), Breda Theakston (Diocese of Leeds), Clare Ward (CBCEW Home Mission Desk), Susan Westmacott (Parish Pastoral Assistant, Diocese of Middlesbrough), Rev Deacon Philip White, JCL (Diocese of Shrewsbury), Harry & Muff Wilde (Engaged Encounter) all generously gave time and energy to the Marriage Preparation Working Party in developing these guidelines. They were ably inspired by Dr Jim Healy from the Diocese of Joliet in Illinois, USA.

Every project needs a resource person to draw everything together. These Guidelines have been resourced by Caroline Dollard, Family Catechesis Development Worker within the Marriage & Family Life Project Office. They have been further informed by a series of soundings she has conducted with Marriage preparation providers in the dioceses of Leeds, Middlesbrough, Birmingham, and Portsmouth to ensure that this document is both useful and practical. Last, but by no means least, this work has been gently and ably shepherded by Bishop John Hine, Chair of the Bishops' Committee for Marriage and Family Life until December 2013 and its current Chair, Bishop Peter Doyle of the Diocese of Northampton.

Appendix 1 Preparing Engaged Couples for Marriage: Amoris Laetitia

205. The Synod Fathers stated in a number of ways that we need to help young people discover the dignity and beauty of marriage. They should be helped to perceive the attraction of a complete union that elevates and perfects the social dimension of existence, gives sexuality its deepest meaning, and benefits children by offering them the best context for their growth and development.
206. “The complexity of today’s society and the challenges faced by the family require a greater effort on the part of the whole Christian community in preparing those who are about to be married. The importance of the virtues needs to be included. Among these, chastity proves invaluable for the genuine growth of love between persons. In this regard, the Synod Fathers agreed on the need to involve the entire community more extensively by stressing the witness of families themselves and by grounding marriage preparation in the process of Christian initiation by bringing out the connection between marriage, baptism and the other sacraments. The Fathers also spoke of the need for specific programmes of marriage preparation aimed at giving couples a genuine experience of participation in ecclesial life and a complete introduction to various aspects of family life.”
207. I encourage Christian communities to recognize the great benefit that they themselves receive from supporting engaged couples as they grow in love. As the Italian bishops have observed, those couples are “a valuable resource because, as they sincerely commit themselves to grow in love and self-giving, they can help renew the fabric of the whole ecclesial body. Their special form of friendship can prove contagious and foster the growth of friendship and fraternity in the Christian community of which they are a part.” There are a number of legitimate ways to structure programmes of marriage preparation, and each local Church will discern how best to provide a suitable formation without distancing young people from the sacrament. They do not need to be taught the entire Catechism or overwhelmed with too much information. Here too, “it is not great knowledge, but rather the ability to feel and relish things interiorly that contents and satisfies the soul.” Quality is more important than quantity, and priority should be given – along with a renewed proclamation of the kerygma – to an attractive and helpful presentation of information that can help couples to live the rest of their lives together “with great courage and generosity.” Marriage preparation should be a kind of “initiation” to the sacrament of matrimony, providing couples with the help they need to receive the sacrament worthily and to make a solid beginning of life as a family.
208. With the help of missionary families, the couple’s own families and a variety of pastoral resources, ways should also be found to offer a remote preparation that, by example and good advice, can help their love to grow and mature. Discussion groups and optional talks on a variety of topics of genuine interest to young people can also prove helpful. All the same, some individual meetings remain essential, since the primary objective is to help each to learn how to love this very real person with whom he or she plans to share his or her whole life. Learning to love someone does not happen automatically, nor can it be taught in a workshop just prior to the celebration of marriage. For every couple, marriage preparation begins at birth. What they received from their family should prepare them to know themselves and to make a full and definitive commitment. Those best prepared for marriage are probably those who learned what Christian marriage is from their own parents, who chose each other unconditionally and daily renew this decision. In this sense, pastoral initiatives aimed at helping married couples to grow in love and in the Gospel of the family also help their children, by preparing them for their future married life. Nor should we underestimate the pastoral value of traditional religious practices. To give just

one example: I think of Saint Valentine's Day; in some countries, commercial interests are quicker to see the potential of this celebration than are we in the Church.

209. The timely preparation of engaged couples by the parish community should also assist them to recognize eventual problems and risks. In this way, they can come to realize the wisdom of breaking off a relationship whose failure and painful aftermath can be foreseen. In their initial enchantment with one another, couples can attempt to conceal or relativize certain things and to avoid disagreements; only later do problems surface. For this reason, they should be strongly encouraged to discuss what each expects from marriage, what they understand by love and commitment, what each wants from the other and what kind of life they would like to build together. Such discussions would help them to see if they in fact have little in common and to realize that mutual attraction alone will not suffice to keep them together. Nothing is more volatile, precarious and unpredictable than desire. The decision to marry should never be encouraged unless the couple has discerned deeper reasons that will ensure a genuine and stable commitment.
210. In any event, if one partner clearly recognizes the other's weak points, he or she needs to have a realistic trust in the possibility of helping to develop the good points that counterbalance them, and in this way to foster their human growth. This entails a willingness to face eventual sacrifices, problems and situations of conflict; it demands a firm resolve to be ready for this. Couples need to be able to detect danger signals in their relationship and to find, before the wedding, effective ways of responding to them. Sadly, many couples marry without really knowing one another. They have enjoyed each other's company and done things together, but without facing the challenge of revealing themselves and coming to know who the other person truly is.
211. Both short-term and long-term marriage preparation should ensure that the couple do not view the wedding ceremony as the end of the road, but instead embark upon marriage as a lifelong calling based on a firm and realistic decision to face all trials and difficult moments together. The pastoral care of engaged and married couples should be centred on the marriage bond, assisting couples not only to deepen their love but also to overcome problems and difficulties. This involves not only helping them to accept the Church's teaching and to have recourse to her valuable resources, but also offering practical programmes, sound advice, proven strategies and psychological guidance. All this calls for a pedagogy of love, attuned to the feelings and needs of young people and capable of helping them to grow interiorly. Marriage preparation should also provide couples with the names of places, people and services to which they can turn for help when problems arise. It is also important to remind them of the availability of the sacrament of Reconciliation, which allows them to bring their sins and past mistakes, and their relationship itself, before God, and to receive in turn his merciful forgiveness and healing strength.

Appendix 2 The Order of Celebrating Matrimony³³

INTRODUCTION

The Importance and Dignity of the Sacrament of Matrimony

1. The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish a lifelong partnership between themselves³⁴ derives its force and strength from creation, but for the Christian faithful it is also raised up to a higher dignity, since it is numbered among the Sacraments of the new covenant.
2. A marriage is established by the conjugal covenant, that is, the irrevocable consent of both spouses, by which they freely give themselves to each other and accept each other. Moreover, this singular union of a man and a woman requires, and the good of the children demands, the complete fidelity of the spouses and the indissoluble unity of the bond.³⁵
3. Furthermore, the institution of marriage itself and conjugal love are, by their very nature, ordered to the procreation and formation of children and find in them, as it were, their ultimate crown.³⁶ Children are thus truly the supreme gift of marriage and contribute greatly to the good of the parents themselves.
4. The intimate community of life and love, by which spouses “are no longer two, but one flesh,”³⁷ has been established by God the Creator, provided with its own proper laws, and endowed with that blessing which alone was not forfeited by punishment for original sin.³⁸ This sacred bond, therefore, does not depend on human choice, but rather on the Author of Marriage, who ordained it to be endowed with its own goods and ends.³⁹
5. Indeed Christ the Lord, making a new creation and making all things new,⁴⁰ has willed that marriage be restored to its primordial form and holiness in such a way that what God has joined together, no one may put asunder,⁴¹ and raised this indissoluble conjugal contract to the dignity of a Sacrament so that it might signify more clearly and represent more easily the model of his own nuptial covenant with the Church.⁴²
6. By his presence, Christ brought blessing and joy to the wedding at Cana, where he changed water into wine and so foreshadowed the hour of the new and eternal covenant: “For just as of old God made himself present to his people with a covenant of love and fidelity, so now the Saviour of the human race”⁴³ offers himself to the Church as Spouse, fulfilling his covenant with her in his Paschal Mystery.

33 The English translation of The Order of Celebrating Matrimony © 2013, International Commission on English in the Liturgy Corporation (ICEL). All rights reserved.

34 Cf. C.I.C. can. 1055, §1.

35 Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 48.

36 Cf. *ibid.*

37 Matthew 19:6.

38 Cf. Nuptial Blessing.

39 Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 48.

40 Cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17.

41 Cf. Matthew 19:6.

42 Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 48.

43 *Ibid.*

7. Through Baptism, which is the Sacrament of faith, a man and a woman are once and for all incorporated into the covenant of Christ with the Church in such a way that their conjugal community is assumed into Christ's charity and is enriched by the power of his Sacrifice.⁴⁴ From this new condition it follows that a valid marriage between the baptized is always a Sacrament.⁴⁵
8. By the Sacrament of Matrimony Christian spouses signify and participate in the mystery of unity and fruitful love between Christ and the Church;⁴⁶ therefore, both in embracing conjugal life and in accepting and educating their children, they help one another to become holy and have their own place and particular gift among the People of God.⁴⁷
9. Through this Sacrament the Holy Spirit brings it about that, just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her,⁴⁸ Christian spouses also strive to nurture and foster their union in equal dignity, mutual giving, and the undivided love that flows from the divine font of charity. In this way, uniting divine and human realities, they persevere in good times and in bad, faithful in body and mind,⁴⁹ remaining complete strangers to any adultery and divorce.⁵⁰
10. The true development of conjugal love and the whole meaning of family life, without diminishment of the other ends of marriage, are directed to disposing Christian spouses to cooperate wholeheartedly with the love of the Creator and Saviour, who through them increases and enriches his family from day to day.⁵¹ Therefore, trusting in divine Providence and developing a spirit of sacrifice,⁵² they glorify the Creator and strive for perfection in Christ, as they carry out the role of procreation with generous, human and Christian responsibility.⁵³
11. For God, who has called the couple to marriage, continues to call them to marriage.⁵⁴ Those who marry in Christ are able, with faith in the Word of God, to celebrate fruitfully the mystery of the union of Christ and the Church, to live it rightly, and to bear witness to it publicly before all. A marriage that is desired, prepared for, celebrated, and lived daily in the light of faith is that which is "joined by the Church, strengthened by a sacrificial offering, sealed by a blessing, announced by Angels, and ratified by the Father... How wonderful the bond of the two believers: one in hope, one in vow, one in discipline, one in the same service! They are both children of one Father and servants of the same Master, with no separation of spirit and flesh. Indeed, they are two in one flesh; where there is one flesh, there is also one spirit."⁵⁵

44 Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 13: A.A.S. 74 (1982), 95; cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 48.

45 Cf. C.I.C., can. 1055, §2.

46 Cf. Ephesians 5:25.

47 Cf. 1 Corinthians 7:7; Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, no. 11.

48 Cf. Ephesians 5:25.

49 Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, nos. 48, 50.

50 Cf. *ibid.*, no. 49.

51 Cf. *ibid.*, no. 50.

52 Cf. 1 Corinthians 7:5.

53 Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 50.

54 Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 51: A.A.S. 74 (1982), 143.

55 Tertullian, *Ad uxorem*, II, VIII: CCL I, 393.

Duties and Ministries

1. The preparation and celebration of marriage, which above all concern the future spouses themselves and their families, belong, as regards pastoral and liturgical care, to the Bishop, to the pastor and his associates, and, at least to some degree, to the entire ecclesial community.⁵⁶
2. It is for the Bishop, who is to take into account any norms or pastoral guidelines that may have been established by the Conference of Bishops regarding the preparation of engaged couples or the pastoral care of marriage, to regulate the celebration and pastoral care of the Sacrament throughout the diocese by organizing assistance for the Christian faithful so that the state of marriage may be preserved in a Christian spirit and advance in perfection.⁵⁷
3. Pastors of souls must take care that in their own community this assistance is provided especially:
 - I by preaching, by catechesis adapted to children, young people, and adults, and through means of social communication, so that the Christian faithful are instructed about the meaning of Christian marriage and about the role of Christian spouses and parents;
 - II by personal preparation for entering marriage, so that those to be married are disposed to the holiness and duties of their new state;
 - III by a fruitful liturgical celebration of marriage, so that it becomes clear that the spouses signify and participate in the mystery of the unity and fruitful love between Christ and the Church;
 - IV by help offered to those who are married, so that, faithfully preserving and protecting the conjugal covenant, they daily come to lead a holier and fuller family life.⁵⁸
4. Sufficient time is required for a suitable preparation for marriage. Engaged couples should be made aware of this necessity in advance.
5. Led by the love of Christ, pastors are to welcome engaged couples and, above all, to foster and nourish their faith
6. The engaged couple, having been reminded, if appropriate, of the fundamental elements of Christian doctrine mentioned above (nos. 111) should be given catechesis not only about the Church's teaching on marriage and the family but also about the Sacrament and its rites, prayers, and readings, so that they may be able to celebrate it thoughtfully and fruitfully.
7. Catholics who have not yet received the Sacrament of Confirmation are to receive it to complete their Christian initiation before they are admitted to marriage if this can be done without grave inconvenience. It is recommended to the engaged couple that in preparation for the Sacrament of Matrimony they receive the Sacrament of Penance, if necessary, and that they approach the Most Holy Eucharist, especially within the celebration of marriage itself.⁵⁹
8. Before a marriage is celebrated, it must be established that nothing stands in the way of its valid and licit celebration.⁶⁰
9. In conducting the preparation, pastors, taking into account prevailing attitudes toward marriage and the family, should endeavour to evangelize the couple's authentic and mutual love in the light of faith. Even the requirements of law for contracting a valid and licit marriage can serve

56 Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 66: A.A.S. 74 (1982), 159-162.

57 Cf. *ibid.*; cf. C.I.C., can. 1063-1064.

58 Cf. C.I.C., can. 1063.

59 Cf. C.I.C., can. 1065.

60 Cf. *ibid.*, can. 1066.

to promote a living faith and fruitful love between the couple, ordered toward establishing a Christian family.

10. But if every effort fails, and an engaged couple openly and expressly demonstrate that they reject what the Church intends when the marriage of baptized persons is celebrated, the pastor of souls is not permitted to celebrate the Sacrament. Though reluctant, he must take note of the situation and convince those involved that, in these circumstances, it is not the Church, but they themselves, who prevent the celebration they are asking for.⁶¹
11. With regard to marriage, it is by no means rare for special cases to arise: such as marriage with a baptized nonCatholic, with a catechumen, with a person who is simply unbaptized, or even with a person who has explicitly rejected the Catholic faith. Those in charge of pastoral care should keep in mind the norms of the Church pertaining to these types of cases, and they should, if the occasion requires, have recourse to the competent authority.
12. It is appropriate that the same Priest who prepares the engaged couple should, during the celebration of the Sacrament itself, give the homily, receive the spouses' consent, and celebrate the Mass.
13. It also pertains to a Deacon, after receiving the faculty from the pastor or from the local Ordinary, to preside at the celebration of the Sacrament,⁶² without omitting the Nuptial Blessing.
14. Where there is a shortage of Priests and Deacons, the Diocesan Bishop can delegate laypersons to assist at marriages, after a prior favourable vote of the Conference of Bishops and after the permission of the Apostolic See has been obtained. A suitable layperson is to be selected, who is capable of giving instruction to those preparing to be married and able to perform the marriage liturgy properly.⁶³ The layperson asks for the consent of the spouses and receives it in the name of the Church.⁶⁴
15. Other laypersons, however, can play a part in various ways both in the spiritual preparation of the engaged couple and in the celebration of the rite itself. Moreover, the entire Christian community should cooperate to bear witness to the faith and to be a sign to the world of Christ's love.
16. The marriage is to be celebrated in the parish of one or other of the engaged persons, or elsewhere with the permission of the proper Ordinary or pastor.⁶⁵

The Celebration of Marriage

The Preparation

1. Since marriage is ordered toward the increase and sanctification of the People of God, its celebration displays a communitarian character that encourages the participation also of the parish community, at least through some of its members. With due regard for local customs and as occasion suggests, several marriages may be celebrated at the same time or the celebration of the Sacrament may take place during the Sunday assembly.
2. The celebration itself of the Sacrament must be diligently prepared, as far as possible, with the engaged couple. Marriage should normally be celebrated within Mass. Nevertheless, with due regard both for the necessities of pastoral care and for the way in which the prospective spouses and those present participate in the life of the Church, the pastor should decide

61 Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris consortio*, no. 68: A.A.S. 74 (1982), 165.

62 Cf. C.I.C., can. 1111.

63 Cf. *ibid.*, can. 1112, §2.

64 Cf. *ibid.*, can. 1108, §2.

65 Cf. *ibid.*, can. 1115.

whether it would be preferable to propose that marriage be celebrated within or outside of Mass.⁶⁶ The following should be chosen with the engaged couple, as the circumstances so suggest, the readings from Sacred Scripture, which will be explained in the homily; the form for expressing mutual consent; the formularies for the blessing of rings, for the Nuptial Blessing, for the intentions of the Universal Prayer or Prayer of the Faithful, and for the chants. Moreover, attention should also be given to the appropriate use of options provided in the rite as well as to local customs, which may be observed if appropriate.

3. The chants to be sung during the Rite of marriage should be appropriate and should express the faith of the Church, with attention paid to the importance of the Responsorial Psalm within the Liturgy of the Word. What is said concerning the chants applies also to the selection of other musical works.
4. The festive character of the celebration of marriage should be suitably expressed even in the manner of decorating the church. Nevertheless, local Ordinaries are to be vigilant that, apart from the honours due to civil authorities in keeping with the norm of liturgical laws, no favouritism be shown to private persons or classes of persons.⁶⁷
5. If a marriage is celebrated on a day having a penitential character, especially during Lent, the pastor is to counsel the spouses to take into account the special nature of that day. The celebration of marriage on Friday of the Passion of the Lord and Holy Saturday is to be avoided altogether.

The Rite to Be Used

1. In the celebration of marriage within Mass, the rite described in Chapter I is used. In the celebration of marriage without Mass, the rite should take place after a Liturgy of the Word according to the norm of Chapter II.

Whenever marriage is celebrated within Mass, the Ritual Mass “The Celebration of Marriage” is used with sacred vestments of the colour white or of a festive colour. On those days listed in nos. 1-4 of the Table of Liturgical Days, however, the Mass of the day is used with its own readings, with inclusion of the Nuptial Blessing and, if appropriate, the proper formula for the final blessing.

If, however, during Christmas and Ordinary Time, the parish community participates in a Sunday Mass during which marriage is celebrated, the Mass of the Sunday is used.

Nevertheless, since a Liturgy of the Word adapted for the celebration of marriage has a great impact in the handing on of catechesis about the Sacrament itself and about the duties of the spouses, when the Mass “For the Celebration of Marriage” is not said, one of the readings may be taken from the texts provided for the celebration of marriage (nos. 179222).

2. The main elements of the celebration of marriage are to stand out clearly, namely: the Liturgy of the Word, in which are expressed the importance of Christian marriage in the history of salvation and the responsibilities and duties of marriage to be attended to for the sanctification of the spouses and of their children; the consent of the contracting parties, which the person assisting asks for and receives; the venerable prayer by which the blessing of God is invoked upon the bride and bridegroom; finally, Eucharistic Communion of both spouses and of others present, by which, above all, their charity is nurtured and they are raised up to communion with the Lord and with their neighbour.⁶⁸

66 Cf. Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, art. 78.

67 Cf. *ibid.*, art. 32.

68 Cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam actuositatem*, no. 3; Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, no. 12.

3. If a marriage takes place between a Catholic and a baptized nonCatholic, the rite for celebrating Matrimony without Mass (nos. 79117) should be used. If, however, the situation warrants it, the rite for celebrating Matrimony within Mass (nos. 4578) may be used, with the consent of the local Ordinary; but with regard to admission of the nonCatholic party to Eucharistic Communion, the norms issued for various cases are to be observed.⁶⁹ If a marriage takes place between a Catholic and a catechumen or a nonChristian, the rite given below (nos. 152178) is to be used, with the variations provided for different situations.
4. Although pastors are ministers of Christ's Gospel for all, they should, nonetheless, direct special attention to those, whether Catholics or nonCatholics, who never or rarely take part in the celebration of marriage or the Eucharist. This pastoral norm applies in the first place to the spouses themselves.
5. If marriage is celebrated within Mass, in addition to those things required for the celebration of Mass, *The Order of Celebrating Matrimony* and rings for the spouses should be prepared in the sanctuary. There should also be prepared, if appropriate, a vessel of holy water with an aspergillum and a chalice of sufficient size for Communion under both kinds.

⁶⁹ Cf. C.I.C., can. 844.

Appendix 3 Background to the Guidelines

1. These Guidelines for the Preparation of Couples for marriage are the result of a sustained period of reflection on marriage preparation within the Department for Christian Responsibility and Citizenship of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. This reflection began in 2010 when the Bishops' Committee for Marriage and Family Life surveyed the experience of marriage preparation across England and Wales. It continued when the findings of this survey were subjected to practitioner reflection at a national conference for marriage preparation providers in 2011. It was further informed by the deliberations of two expert advisers, Dr Lester Coleman of One Plus One and Dr Thomas Knieps-Port Le Roi, INTAMS Chair for the Study of Marriage and Spirituality at the Catholic University of Leuven, who reviewed the survey findings and the feedback from the conference participants and offered the Committee a number of recommendations for action.
2. These recommendations were pursued by a Working Party convened in November 2013, comprising leaders from many of the programmes currently in use in parishes and dioceses across England and Wales and other experts. The Working Party addressed in particular the series of strategic recommendations contained in the Coleman report, and the bulk of this document reflects their advice on how best:
 - I To support each bishop's work on marriage preparation, and to ensure greater confidence among the faithful in this Christian service.
 - II To establish stronger structures for recruitment, training, continuing professional development and supervision of volunteers involved in marriage preparation.
 - III To ensure an holistic formation of providers in both the relational and religious dimensions of the couple relationship.
 - IV Over a five-year period, to extend access by engaged couples to formal (proximate) marriage preparation, from the current estimate of 40%, to 60% of all couples.
 - V To improve communication between organisations and dioceses involved in the work of marriage preparation.
 - VI To develop a common evaluation tool for all marriage preparation providers, so that the particular effect of the different programmes in use can be better understood.
3. The recommendations of Professor Thomas Knieps-Port Le Roi on the survey findings have been incorporated into these Guidelines on the premise that further work remains to be accomplished in enhancing the status of existing religious and spiritual components, sharpening its contours with and in the relational components:

We do, however, concur with the conclusion in the One Plus One report that given the couples' overall satisfaction and – to be added here – the providers' overall qualified vision and experience in this field, future action to improve marriage Preparation should focus on the delivery rather than on the course contents itself (Coleman, 2012, #116). With the exception of including inter-church issues more systematically, the recommendation here is not to substantially enlarge or modify the existing religious and spiritual component, but to enhance its status and sharpen its contours next to and in connection with the relational issues. On a more practical level, this would possibly imply a stronger focus on theological, spiritual, and pastoral formation of the providers. More importantly, however, awareness has to be created among the clergy and lay providers alike that the sacramental, spiritual, and liturgical aspects are an integral part of any Catholic marriage preparation and should therefore not be left over to the prenuptial inquiry or the discussion of

the liturgy between the individual couple and the priest. Clergy should therefore be encouraged to take advantage of the wealth of experience, competence, and enthusiasm of qualified (married) lay providers in their congregations and to determine in close consultation and cooperation with them how they fit into this common endeavour of the Catholic community to provide couples the best possible support for their marriages. (Knieps, 2012, p21)

The Bishops' Conference has agreed the development of online formation modules for those engaged in marriage and family ministry to enhance theological and practical theological expertise of lay animators of these ministries.

4. The request for these guidelines emerged from the first ever national gathering of marriage preparation providers in 2011, hosted by the Bishops' Conference. Between them the nearly 200 participants represented most, if not all, of the various formal programmes of marriage preparation currently in use in the Catholic Church in England and Wales. Having listened to and reflected on the findings of the 2010 survey of marriage preparation, these providers requested that the Bishops' Conference develop guidelines for their work. They wanted the assurance of working together to a shared vision and to be able to demonstrate that lay ministry to marriage preparation is both rigorous and well informed, as well as essential to the life and mission of the Church. Lay providers need the confidence of pastors if they are to reach and serve couples preparing to marry in the Catholic Church. It is hoped that these guidelines will underpin their invaluable work and provide the assurances necessary for all those involved.
5. In requesting these Guidelines providers were mindful of the need for flexibility of approaches to marriage preparation. They asked for Guidelines that would *support but not dictate* their training, continuing professional development, delivery methods and programme content. They need to be free enough to adapt their ministry to different and changing circumstances, both in the parish and in the lives of couples. They also need the Church to accept and respect their own expertise and judgment in meeting some of the requirements of Catholic marriage preparation. So we would caution against seeing these Guidelines as prescriptive. We offer them as a benchmark of good practice, and an incentive and tool for reviewing parish and diocesan marriage preparation practices.
6. When the findings of the 2010 Catholic Marriage Preparation Survey were reviewed by experts it was gratifying to learn that the core content of our existing programmes already meet couples' relational needs. That is, our programmes, for the most part, equip couples with basic relationship education and awareness that will help them sustain their marital commitment. The areas for development therefore are primarily those of enabling more couples to benefit from this lay ministry and of integrating marriage preparation more fully into the life of each parish community. This has implications both for existing pastoral practices and for recruiting, training and supporting more providers. These Guidelines are geared towards supporting dioceses, deaneries, pastoral areas and parishes in making that happen.

Appendix 4 The Benefits of Marriage Preparation

Background

1. The Church has recognised the importance of preparation for the sacrament of marriage by making it obligatory. In Church teaching, pastors of souls are obliged to ensure that the parish community assists couples to prepare in such a way that “disposes the spouses to the holiness and duties of their new state” (Canon 1063).
2. In *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) Pope St John Paul II speaks of the importance of the family, society and the Church in preparing young people for marriage (66). He divides the process of preparation into three sections: (1) remote - formation of values and beliefs within the family as a child grows up, which form the foundations for being able to make healthy stable relationships; (2) proximate - the more specific catechesis for marriage including education about life as a couple and as a family within a community; and (3) immediate - preparation for the celebration of the sacrament of matrimony.
3. This is not something which clergy are expected to do alone:

“Various organisations, especially family associations, should try by their programmes of instruction and action to strengthen young people and spouses themselves, particularly those recently wed, and to train them for family, social and apostolic life.” (Gaudium et Spes, 1965, #52)
4. *Familiaris Consortio* also exhorts the Church to promote better and more intensive programmes of marriage preparation:

“to eliminate as far as possible the difficulties that many married couples find themselves in, and even more in order to favour positively the establishing and maturing of successful marriages.” (Familiaris Consortio, 1981 #66)

What are Marriage Preparation Programmes?

5. Researchers generally distinguish between two types of pre-marital programmes: inventory-based assessment and feedback (such as FOCCUS or Prepare Enrich), and skills-based relationship education. Both are intended to help couples, through providing education and skills, to communicate better or deal with conflict, in order to increase their chances of having healthy and stable relationships in the long term. The major reason for offering pre-marital programmes is based on the premise that how a couple communicate with each other and manage any disagreements or conflict *early in a relationship* will affect the quality and health of their relationship *over time*. But marriage preparation programmes have many benefits, not only for the couple and their family but also for society and the Church community.

What are the benefits of Marriage Preparation for the Couples?

6. Positive impact is evidenced in a number of international studies on pre-marital programmes. Coleman⁷⁰ cites several examples. From a random survey conducted in the USA, Stanley et al (2006) found that participation in pre-marital education was associated with decreased odds of divorce, lower conflict and higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Laurenceau et al (2004) conducted a Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT), which showed that pre-marital education was

70 Coleman, L. 2012. marriage Preparation in the Catholic Community: An Independent Assessment of Evaluation Data. London: One Plus One. P.9.

associated with a decrease in negative communication. In addition, Coleman quotes Larson et al, researching in 2007 through a RCT of online pre-marital education, which showed positive outcomes in terms of relationship satisfaction, commitment, and opinions, feelings, and readiness for marriage.

7. Evidence from the UK is less prolific. However a recent Department for Education⁷¹ funded evaluation study in 2013 (conducted by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, National Foundation for Educational Research, the Thomas Coram Research Unit, and Qa Research) has added to the evidence base in support of marriage preparation. This study evaluated three relationship support interventions (i.e. marriage preparation, relationship education and couple counselling), including Marriage Care's marriage preparation programmes.⁷² It found that for those who had attended a skills-based course, there were significant positive effects on their well-being. For those who had attended inventory type sessions, there were significant improvements in their relationship quality.
8. Overall, 80% of those who attended marriage preparation felt that as a result of attending marriage preparation, their understanding of how a healthy relationship is built and sustained had increased. In addition, through attending marriage preparation, couples said they were significantly more likely to seek support if things were to go wrong in the future, despite their indicating to the contrary prior to the course. For a relatively short intervention, their attitudes towards accessing relationship support were changed. All those interviewed believed every engaged couple would benefit from attending some form of marriage preparation.
9. In summary, for couples marriage preparation can:
 - Improve relationship quality ;
 - Improve well-being;
 - Improve relational capability for the future;
 - Make them more open to asking for help sooner.
10. Most importantly, for those attending marriage preparation courses within a Church context, there is an opportunity to reflect on the Gospel vision formulated in the Rite of marriage, their mutual consent, and the meaning of their marriage vows towards living a faithful, loving, fruitful, life together.

What are the benefits of Marriage Preparation for Society?

11. The quality of a couple's relationship has wider impact than simply for the couple themselves. At the heart of a healthy marriage is a relationship that enriches their children, their families and their communities, as well as society as a whole. By taking part in marriage preparation, and improving communication and conflict management, and making it more likely that a couple will turn for support if things get tough, research has shown that a couple's relational capability will be strengthened into the future.
12. On the other hand, if relationships deteriorate or are poor, then this has real impact on the couple, their children and on the family's ability to contribute to their communities and society. The cost of family breakdown and poor relationships is a cost to wider society, impacting on, for example, adult and child mental health, heart disease and childhood obesity,⁷³ as well as leading

71 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationship-support-interventions-evaluation>

72 The other interventions were Let's Stick Together and couple counselling delivered by AFCS, Relate and Tavistock Centre for Couple Relations.

73 For evidence on this see '*Relationships: the missing link in public health* The Relationships Alliance 2013

to families being more likely to need the financial assistance of the state.

13. A Department for Education funded evaluation study⁷⁴ also showed that there is a real cost benefit to society as a result of marriage preparation, by making it more likely that the relationships of couples would stay stronger and healthier for longer. For every £1 spent on an inventory-style preparation (such as FOCCUS) there was a benefit of £11.50, and even though there was no cost benefit analysis of the skills-based marriage preparation, the team concluded that this intervention could also lead to cost savings in the future.

What are the benefits of Marriage Preparation for the Church and Parishes?

14. Church teaching recognises the “great importance”⁷⁵ of preparation for marriage and family life, not only for the couple, but for the life of the Church itself, because of the importance of marriage.

“Questions that affect the family converge in the life of the engaged, the future spouses. They are therefore invited to understand the meaning of the responsible and mature love of the community of life and love which their family will be, a real domestic church which will contribute toward enriching the whole Church.”

15. Dr Lester Coleman, in his evaluation of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church in 2012,⁷⁶ reports the views of marriage preparation providers (in an open ended non-quantifiable question) on how they saw the role of marriage preparation within the broader life and mission of the Church. The five key viewpoints were:

- sharing the Church’s teaching on the sacrament of marriage;
- increasing couple involvement in the Church;
- deepening awareness of marriage as a vocation;
- laying a firm foundation for the future; and
- affirming marriage and preventing marital breakdown.

Sharing the Church’s Teaching

16. For many couples approaching the Church to be married, this will be their first experience of the Church’s pastoral concern for their future happiness. It may also be their first opportunity to begin to learn of God’s love and care for them, to see in their own love story, the love story of God for his people and from all that, their own part in the story of salvation, passing on faith in God to the next generation. Several of the providers surveyed underlined that marriage Preparation makes couples discover the rich teaching of the Church about marriage, sexuality, and the family and thus challenges them to correct the distorted image that often prevails in secular society about the Church and its teaching.

“I think that our course helps couples hear the teaching of the Church about marriage, sexuality and the family.”

74 See <http://www.relate.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/2014/1/28/new-government-report-shows-couple-counselling-and-marriage-preparation-services-deliver-over-ps11-benefit-every-ps1-spent>

75 Pontifical Council for the Family (1996) Preparation for the Sacrament of marriage

76 http://www.celebratingfamily.org.uk/docs/FINAL%20marriage%20Preparation%20in%20the%20Catholic%20Church%2010_10_12.pdf

“Challenging stereotypical views (by couples) about the Church’s attitudes to marriage, fertility and sexuality.”

17. If the couple experience the welcome, love, acceptance and support of the Church at this crucial time of formation of their relationship with their partner, it opens up an opportunity for the Church for evangelisation and mutual growth. As the Pontifical Council for the Family, in its document on Marriage Preparation (1996), urges:

“It would be desirable if the favourable moment of marriage preparation could be transformed, as a sign of hope, into a New Evangelization for the future families.”

Increasing Couple Involvement in the Parish

18. Marriage preparation providers form part of the welcome offered to the couple as they move more fully into Christian faith and the life of the Church, particularly if the couple’s involvement has not been strong before. The welcome they receive at this crucial time is a great sign to the couple of God’s love for them, shown through the Church. It is often foundational to their continuing relationship with the Church, and is a real opportunity for evangelisation and invitation to deepen faith in Christ. Knieps also reflected that:

“Some providers regard marriage Preparation as an opportunity to “evangelise” and to “witness to Christian life.” While these notions cover different meanings... a strong emphasis is laid on the integrity of the Catholic community of which marriage preparation is seen as the outside face and hallmark and which it ultimately has to serve. As one of the providers succinctly expressed when summarizing the meaning of marriage preparation: ‘The community of the church is supported.’”

19. A good experience of marriage preparation can lay the foundations for a fruitful relationship to develop between the couple and the parish, enabling the couple to accept the parish as an extended family to whom they can turn in times of joy and sorrow, and in times of challenge and opportunity. Of the couples surveyed in 2010, most felt that their experience of Catholic marriage preparation enhanced their self-understanding, their understanding of their relationship with each other, their understanding of marriage as a sacrament and their appreciation of the Catholic Church. These fruits of a largely unsung ministry are no small matter as Pope Francis invites us all to get involved ‘by word and deed in people’s daily lives.’

Deepening Awareness of the Sacrament

20. Knieps reflects that marriage preparation, for the providers is about enabling marrying couples to tap the spiritual resources that lie at the basis of their personal commitment and find their expression in the sacramental celebration of their marriage. Providers see it as their specific task to help couples become aware of this spiritual potential and thus increase their chances to have happy and successful marriages. Several providers for instance say that the course helps *“to strengthen the sacrament and vocation of marriage”* and *“to live out the Gospel message in adherence to the teaching of the church.”* They do not always dissociate the personal practice of faith and of a sacramental life from its contribution to the larger Church community. However, one can single out a number of comments which regard it as the primary objective of the courses to help *“people with their faith journey as they celebrate the Sacrament of marriage.”*

“Reaffirms the couple’s faith and commitment to each other and the importance of the sacrament – for God’s blessing and grace.”

“The mission of the Church is to spread the Gospel message of God’s love. By giving couples an opportunity to reflect on the sacrament that they are about to receive,

we equip couples with the necessary strategies and tools to support each other and remain committed to their vows, even when the going gets tough. Our courses ultimately strengthen married couples and consequently strengthen families.”

Laying a Firm Foundation

21. Knieps reflects that the Church’s care for the stability of marital relations by means of marriage Preparation contributes to the common good and to the broader society. Providers refer to marriage serving as bedrock for society and point to the well-being of children, families, and the larger community as a whole which is greatly served by strong marriages.

“Marriage is at the core of family and community and forms the bedrock for society to flourish. The Catholic Church provides the foundation for the values and behaviours that support marriage. My part in marriage preparation gives me the opportunity to give something back to my community within the Church, my parish and adjacent parishes. It enables me to encourage and provide some steer for young couples entering into marriage, hopefully to contribute to a more harmonious and successful relationship and to bring children into a loving and nurturing environment.”

“I think that a stable, happy relationship in marriage is the best basis for children to grow up in. A secure relationship, whether as a childless couple, parents or children, enables people to serve the Church, their community and society better than an insecure one.”

Affirming Marriage

22. Providers described their Christian activity in a variety of ways, as building the body of the Church, deepening the faith-life of the couple, strengthening the couple relationship and strengthening society. One provider summed this all up as follows:

“The sacrament of marriage is a far-reaching event, not just the actual day of the wedding, but the whole life of the couple, their extended families, their children and grandchildren. We have the privilege of helping the couples to learn more about their relationship, specifically by learning more about communication, conflict resolution, commitment, spirituality, sexuality and self-esteem. This gives them a better chance of surviving the stresses of trying to live a committed relationship which witnesses to the faith and morals of the Catholic Church and amidst a secular society with often diametrically opposed values. Within this nuclear family, their children will have a better chance of growing up in security and trust and hence learning the Catholic lifestyle. Their family life will then be a better witness to the Catholic faith for extended family, friends and acquaintances.”

23. Pope Francis in his homily to 20 couples about to be married in St Peter’s Basilica in September 2014, spoke of their journey together and the richness of their contribution:

“Families, walking along the paths of life with all their day to day experiences – it is impossible to quantify the strength and depth of humanity contained in a family: mutual help, educational support, relationships developing as family members mature, the sharing of joys and difficulties. Families are the first place in which we are formed as persons and, at the same time, the ‘bricks’ for building up society.”⁷⁷

77 Vatican City, Sept 14th 2014, St Peter’s Basilica, Homily of Pope Francis, at Nuptial Mass for 20 couples, ZENIT, 14.9.2014 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140914_omelia-rito-matrimonio.html

Appendix 5 Thinking about the Impact of Marriage Preparation

Dioceses and parishes can reflect on the short and long term impact of good practice in marriage preparation and marriage support on the life of the couples, their family life and the life of the community. No evaluation design is perfect, nor can the outcomes of evaluation and what we learn be always attributable to the particular experience of marriage preparation. Any evaluation is an opportunity to test the water: How is it going? What difference has it made? How might we improve? This can be achieved using a variety of methods: questionnaires/surveys; interviews; observations; focus groups; parish or area meetings. Outcomes can be assessed at each stage of the delivery process, with the couples, providers, the members of the parish with responsibility, and the wider community.

Here are some suggestions for questions. Choose the ones most relevant to your parish:

1. **Initial welcome:** Audit of parish welcome, environment, including the experience of couples enquiring about marriage preparation.
 - a. What is the couple's first impression?
 - b. What is the quality of our publicity about availability of marriage preparation, and our 'welcome pack' for couples?
 - c. How many 'welcome packs' have we distributed this year?
 - d. How many couples have presented for marriage preparation?
 - e. How effective is the administration of paperwork for couples?
 - f. How can we improve in any of the above areas?
2. **Introduction to the parish:**
 - a. What is the experience of the couple when coming to meet the parish community?
 - b. How do we welcome couples in the liturgy and community life?
 - c. How many couple mentors or support people do we have?
 - d. How do we identify, attract and train these volunteers?
 - e. What is the feedback from mentors? And couples?
 - f. How many 'Listening Skills' training sessions have we done this year?
3. **The Course or Programme:**
 - a. What is the feedback from the couples – the course evaluation?
 - b. How happy were they with both the relationship and religious/spiritual dimensions, and the quality of facilitation?
 - c. How did they receive the training, including the ecclesial dimension?
 - d. Were there any gaps?
 - e. Is the programme the best we can make it?
 - f. What opportunities have we provided, to meet and listen to the couples following their marriage?

- g. What was the feedback on how things are going?
- h. What in particular from their preparation course has been useful to them in the early months/first year of married life?
- i. What further help or support would they like/do they need now?
- j. What is the feedback from the providers?
- k. And couple mentors?
- l. What continuing formation and support have we offered providers and couple mentors?
- m. From their perspective, where are the gaps or areas for improvement in the course content?

4. Deepening experience of parish life:

- a. How do we welcome and include couples in the parish Sunday Liturgy?
- b. What blessings and special prayers do we have for the engaged couples?
- c. How often/when have we used these this year?
- d. How many couples have been invited to parish events, coffee after Mass, socials?
- e. What 'retreat' or other spiritual opportunities have we offered for couples?
- f. How might we improve?

5. Preparation for the Rite of Marriage

- a. How do we prepare the couples for the Sacrament?
- b. How do the couples respond?
- c. How do we help couples in planning for the wedding liturgy, including guidance on scripture and music?
- d. What resources do we use?
- e. How do we involve the wider community in preparation for the Rite of marriage?
- f. What ministries are involved?
- g. Where are the gaps?
- h. How can we improve?

6. Celebration of the Wedding

- a. How do couples experience the celebration of their wedding in the parish?
- b. What is the experience of the ministers?
- c. The wider community?
- d. What tends to go well?
- e. What have been the challenges?
- f. How might we address the challenges, and improve the experience all round?

7. Married and family life

- a. What sort of follow-up do we offer the couples?
- b. How do they respond?
- c. What is the effect on the community?
- d. What sort of strategies do we have for including newly-married couples in the life of the community?
- e. What do we offer in terms of marriage enrichment?
- f. Parenting support?
- g. Faith development opportunities (e.g. Liturgy of the Word with children, family catechesis, prayer and retreat experiences etc.)?
- h. What resources do we provide for use in the home?
- i. How do we get feedback from families?
- j. What support are we offering families where one parent is not Catholic?
- k. How many families have taken part in Baptism, RCIA/CICCA (children 7+ seeking Baptism) or other sacramental preparation this year?
- l. What about opportunities for Reconciliation?
- m. How have we helped parents in their role as first educators?
- n. What form of family catechesis do we use?
- o. How often do we have special celebrations/liturgies for particular needs or circumstances, to celebrate family life in the parish?
- p. How do we keep in touch with couples/families?
- q. How many home visits (lay/clergy) do we have each week/month to newly- weds, expectant parents, and families?
- r. What about visits and ministry to families in difficulties?
- s. What is the general level of confidence in the parish, in the ministry for couples, families and family life?
- t. How might we improve in any of the above?

Appendix 6 Planning a Meeting to Develop Local Marriage Preparation

Who is this for?

Anyone interested in marriage preparation: local clergy and marriage preparation providers (both parish-based and/or externally located); parishioners interested in the support offered to couples, in preparation for marriage and in continuing support for married life.

What are the Aims of this Event?

- I This is an invitation to meet, share experience, and look at the benefits of marriage preparation.
- II To consider the ways in which the local community can develop their response to the needs of couples intending to get married in the Catholic Church, widen access to marriage preparation, and continue to support the vocation of marriage.
- III To look at what is available, and develop a local strategy, towards increasing the quality and quantity of marriage preparation provision in the local area.
- IV To make it attractive and easy for busy people to take part, and build confidence in working together as parishes, families, and course providers, in the shared task of marriage preparation as a key expression and integral part of the Church's mission.

How?

Offer a ½ day, e.g. a Saturday morning; a Sunday afternoon or weekday evening. Consider offering a light meal as part of this hospitable, attractive, accessible event.

First step – Identify and gather a small planning team to take responsibility for the event

Some Suggestions for Content and Process

- I Send invitations to parish(es) and local providers; make preparations for creating a welcoming environment.
- II Possible content for the event:
 - a. Introductions – who is in the room; what is the current picture – our reality.
Discussion: our community's hopes, challenges;
 - b. Why 'marriage preparation'? Brief Overview of the benefits, (Section 6 and Appendix 1) and local 'testimony' from couples on their experience.
Discussion: What are the couples' needs and hopes?
 - c. Input: What might a good experience look like?
 - i. Overview of shape and content, roles and responsibilities in marriage Preparation with mixed clergy/lay team.

- ii. Delivery – the stages in a flexible approach and different models available, including on-line resources.

III Group Work: Implications for developing a good local experience.

- a. Community awareness/role. How/Who?
- b. Commitment to training/development for couple support/mentors and Course providers. How/Who?
- c. Communication/publicity/extend access. How/Who?
- d. Evaluation of what we are doing? How/Who?

IV Plenary feedback – and next steps.

Marriage Prep Event Planning		Action – Who? & Notes
Prior to the event – Shape and content		
Identify and gather a planning team. Include local provider in this team whenever possible		Main contact & Team members:
Who will facilitate the day? (one, two, team?) Who to invite to take part? Consider max. and min. numbers Plan shape of the day and CONTENT *Review any available national material What workshop/or market place topics (if any)? Who will lead these? Invite leaders Who will prepare short opening and closing prayer? Resources/books for sale? Who?		*including time for introductions, and hopes, expectations for marriage preparation in the parish/area
Prior to the event – Practical		
Venue – find and book suitable space		
Check car parking facilities and accessibility		
Check public liability insurance (parish policy)		
Publicity and Advertising Design invitation flyer/booking form or letter or email (whichever most appropriate) and send out to: Local clergy – asking them to bring interested parish members (e.g. catechists, potential couple support/mentors, etc.) Marriage preparation providers (local, where available and the nearest 'national' providers)		
Bookings: Receive/record/communicate		
Prepare for the day		
Hospitality team – welcome, refreshments, etc.		
Registration on the day, name badges, etc.		
Decide on and provide for practical needs: Set up the room/create welcoming space/focal point Bookshop/resources for sale table Laptop, projector, screen, Audio/speakers Internet access (or downloads) Flip chart and pens Evaluation forms or process of some sort Clear up		
Shape of the day		
Outline of the event – timings 2 ½ or 3 hour period Saturday morning Sunday afternoon Evening session		Set up (1hr) Arrivals – refreshments or light meal? (30m) Welcome/Prayer (5m) Setting the scene – who is in the room (10m) Session 1 (1 hr) Stretch Break (10m) Session 2 (1 hr) Closing prayer (5m)

Appendix 7 Mapping Provision - A Template to Adapt

A Survey of Marriage Preparation Provision in the Diocese of				
Name and address of your parish:				
What is your role in the parish?				
Parish Priest	Deacon	Parish Administrator	Lay person working in marriage Preparation	
What form of marriage preparation do you provide in your parish? (tick each that applies)				
Individual sessions with the couples				
Group sessions provided in the parish				
Couples attend sessions elsewhere provided by another organisation				
Other (please describe):				
If the marriage preparation is in your own parish, who delivers it?				
The Parish Priest or Deacon	Religious/Lay people from parish	Outside organisation	Other	
If the marriage preparation course is in your own parish what resources/programmes do you use?				
Marriage Care	Diocesan programme	Your own programme	Other	
Please list the contact details of the people in your parish who provide marriage preparation:				
On average, how many couples do you prepare for marriage in your parish annually?				



