

## THE BISHOP OF LONDON

### Marriage – a Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of the Diocese of London 2003.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

There was a remarkable exchange during one of last year's editions of the BBC radio programme Any Questions. The team was asked for their thoughts on allowing unmarried couples to adopt.

One member pointed out that "if a child is brought up by parents who are not married it is twice as likely to suffer from mental illness as if it is brought up by parents who are married, three times more likely to run away from home and – this is the real shocker – 33 times more likely to suffer serious abuse."

"What those children most desperately need is stability and again here, I am afraid, I don't think that we can ignore the statistics. Over a period only 8% of married couples will have broken up but 52% of cohabiting couples will have broken up after five years."

This contribution was met with silence. The riposte from another member of the team was rewarded with clapping. "We live in a society where children are living in all sorts of circumstances and perhaps we should get away from trying to convince everybody that the only valid and legitimate family unit is 2.4 kids and Mum and Dad because what that does is devalue and de-legitimize the living circumstances of many other children."

You will notice that the melancholy results for children of living contrary to the Maker's Instructions are merely ignored in our society's passionate commitment to seeing the world as a theatre for naked human willing, a world which has no given, let alone divine structure. We are

passionate in our defence of the freedom to be promiscuous no matter what the effect may be on the next generation.

That is of course the New Establishment view and a Church, which seeks to celebrate lifelong faithful marriage is being profoundly counter cultural. A faith “uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures” can be no other. A Church drawing on the experience of many centuries and many cultures, and thereby freed from some of the pressures of the passing moment, recognises, with compassion, that we shall soon enough be reaping the whirlwind which follows our false idea of freedom – the freedom **from** any constraint on consumer choice rather than the freedom **for** nourishing relationships.

Human beings are frail and we fail to live up to our aspirations but marriage has been a source of blessing to countless people. The institution of marriage is intended to embody and point to the faithful love of God whose promises do not fail. The experience of marriage leads us into the mystery that the more we give our selves to another, the richer we grow in soul. Marriage is the context in which it is possible to live the way of Christ and discover that fullness of life comes not with self-aggrandisement but with the self-outpouring of the Son of God.

The Church of England has the very great privilege of preparing couples for their marriage and of conducting a large number of wedding services each year. We act both as registrar of the marriage and minister of its sacramental character. We are all aware from pastoral and personal experience that we depend on the grace of God and that we all fall short of the ideals, which animate the Christian life. In the case of marriage, as we all know, some marriages do fail and such breakdowns are inevitably painful and distressing for all involved. It is of paramount importance that when people turn to us in such circumstances that they find the Church prepared to accompany them at a difficult time in a way that reflects the faithful love of God.

New relationships also emerge in life and again people turn to the Church to mediate God’s blessing upon a further

marriage. Traditionally it has not been customary for the clergy of the Church of England to use the marriage service more than once, although there is no such prohibition in the law of the land.

Now, while remaining faithful to the Church's teaching and her emphatic support for marriage as an institution, the General Synod has sought to make provision within the confines of the law, for those who wish to marry in Church for a second time after a divorce while their former spouse is still living.

It should be emphasised that the Church of England has not changed its teaching about marriage and its obligations. That teaching has been most recently re-affirmed by the House of Bishops' document "Marriage" issued in 1999. I hope that you have been able to read this pithy presentation of the position maintained by the whole of the Western Church and agreed unanimously by our own bishops.

The Church is however altering her pastoral practice to offer couples the possibility of further marriage "in exceptional circumstances."

The Act of Convocation, which forbade such marriages was rescinded during the General Synod Sessions in November of last year. In its place, the Bishops have issued the "Advice" which is being circulated with this letter to assist clergy in judging the circumstances in which it may be appropriate to solemnize a further marriage. We commend these documents, the "Advice" as well as the "Application Form" to your prayerful attention.

The influence of the London Diocesan Synod's deliberations on this subject has been considerable. Our debate combined an emphasis on the sympathetic care which should be offered to all those seeking a second marriage together with an insistence that the intention of all those who wish to be married should be to enter into a life-long covenant.

As Bishops of the Diocese of London we recognise that the clergy will need advice and support in helping them reach

decisions which by law rest with the officiating minister. It remains true, however, that the Church as a whole needs to be prepared to take responsibility for an equitable marriage discipline.

As experience accumulates we look forward to issuing further advice on particular matters during the coming months to assist you in this task. We envisage the need for opportunities to meet to review best practice throughout the Diocese. We would like to encourage you to seek our reflections whenever you feel the need to do so. We would also ask you to keep a record of all such weddings that you conduct as well as the number of applications you turn down. In this way we can monitor the trends across London and serve those who seek the ministry of the Church more effectively.

With thanks for our partnership in the gospel,