

# Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Community: An Independent Assessment of Evaluation Data

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Final Report

September 2012

# **Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Community: An Independent Assessment of Evaluation Data**

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## **Executive summary – Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Community: An independent assessment of evaluation data**

This report has reviewed and analysed evidence from a variety of sources to assess the current picture of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church. This has provided an independent assessment of the evidence and has facilitated a number of recommendations to be suggested to the Catholic Bishops' Conference.

### **Study aim and objectives**

The aim of the study is to *provide couples in the Catholic Church with the best support possible for their marriage*. The specific objectives of the research, as prescribed by the Catholic Bishops' Committee for Marriage and Family Life, are to:

1. Provide scrutiny to the initial analysis of both the survey data and the conference outputs;
2. In relation to the conference recommendation to develop Guidelines/Core Curriculum for marriage preparation (i.e. content and delivery), to assess what evidence of effective practice exists to support this work;
3. To identify contradictions between findings from the couple and provider feedback;
4. To identify, in view of the above, future recommendations and priorities for action.

### **The data available for analysis**

There were a variety of data available for further scrutiny and analysis. Findings were derived from four main sources as follows:

- An online cross-sectional, questionnaire-based survey self-completed by 116 individuals prepared for marriage during 2010. This comprised a total of 23 questions on profile and experiences of marriage preparation;
- An online cross-sectional, questionnaire-based survey self-completed by 242 marriage preparation providers in England and Wales during 2010. This comprised a total of 22 questions on profile and programme provision;
- Post-it responses from 190 conference participants (working in discussion groups of approximately six people) in response to seven key questions (identified from the survey data by the conference Working Group) around recruitment, provision, and content of marriage preparation. An approximate total of 300 discussion group responses;
- Further recommendations, via an evaluation form, from 105 conference participants (mainly marriage preparation providers, and service managers, including Priests). A total of 190 people were offered an evaluation form to complete - 105 participants provided a response (55.3% response rate).

### **Summary of main findings**

The summary of the 'headline' findings are outlined below:

### **Review evidence – Key content and delivery of marriage education/preparation programmes**

- The majority of the marriage education or preparation programmes under review were not specifically developed for marrying in the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, the programmes reviewed do hold relevance in addressing issues generic for all couples.

- Imparting relationship knowledge (e.g. relationship stages and changes, times of relationship strain) appears to be the bedrock of the reviewed programmes. Two further key areas of content are communication skills and relationship quality – both have been shown to improve after marriage preparation (former more so than the latter).
- Communication skills are more easily transferred to couples, compared to actual increases in relationship quality (compounded by a ‘ceiling effect’ of relatively high relationship quality in preparation for marriage). Core communication skills include problem-solving, diminishing criticism and contempt, and improving listening skills.
- To improve relationship quality, core components concentrate on those factors that correlate strongly with quality such as aligning expectations, managing finances, sharing household chores, and agreement about time together. Improvements in relationship quality can also be rooted in the important virtues such as commitment and forgiveness as well as elements specific to the Catholic Church such as the sacrament of marriage.
- Minimising conflict and knowing how to manage conflict is an integral part of the programmes. Further areas of content include having realistic relationship expectations, exposure to negative family-of-origin experiences, personal stress management, listening skills and partner empathy, commitment, bringing up children, and managing dual careers.
- There is some argument for the content of marriage preparation programmes to be customised to the specific needs of the couple.
- A ‘team’ approach to the delivery of marriage preparation was preferable i.e. a combination of Clergy, lay couples and Parish staff.
- There is an indication that longer programmes, to a certain extent, are more effective. One study found that value of the course increased up to a peak of 8-9 sessions following which a decline in value was reported (although there was no indication of what constituted a ‘session’). Sessions longer than those provided in this study (usually around one day or less - see *Study context: Profile of survey respondents*) were found to be more effective
- One study followed up couples extensively (i.e. for several years) after they completed the course, and found that the value of marriage preparation tended to diminish over time.
- There was no difference in the value attached to courses according to whether they were mandatory or voluntary.
- Those reporting high expectations of the marriage preparation courses reported the highest value.
- Supporting resources and materials, and innovative web-based delivery, may well encourage a greater impact on couples, although the evidence of their effectiveness is limited.

#### **Study context: Profile of survey respondents**

- There was a notable proportion of inter-church marriages reported by couples: 59% were Catholic-Catholic and 22% Catholic-Christian of another denomination, with the remainder between a Catholic and a person of another faith, Catholic-Agnostic or Catholic-Atheist.
- For the majority of couples (55%), marriage preparation courses are for one day or less (assuming a ‘series of evenings’ and weekend constitute more than one day, and excluding ‘other’). The proportion of providers who reported the duration of their courses as eight hours or less was 78%, although an earlier question on the provider survey showed that 53% reported that they delivered courses for a day or less (which is closer to the finding from the couple survey).
- The majority (51%) of providers had been preparing couples for marriage for more than seven years, with only 22% for three years or less.

## Recruiting couples and their views of Marriage Preparation

- Overall, the survey findings suggest that those in receipt of marriage preparation find the experience worthwhile. These findings indicate that if the reach was extended to more couples, they would be equally satisfied.
- There was particularly high satisfaction with the ‘timing, location and accessibility’; ‘welcome and hospitality’; and ‘integrity of facilitators’ (all scoring 4 or more out of a possible 5, based on a 5-point likert scale of ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’). Combining the scores for the total of seven satisfaction questions, the mean satisfaction rating overall was 3.9 out of 5.
- Interestingly, a notably lower rating (2.7) was given for the advance information about what to expect beforehand. To be precise, 24% of couples rated themselves as ‘Not at all’ or ‘Not very much’ satisfied as regards the advance information. In relation, 32% of couples reported that it was either ‘difficult’ or ‘slightly inconvenient’ to ‘find information about a marriage preparation course and to organise participation’.
- Four further headline questions indicated course value: Quality of facilitators, quality of course content, value of course to marriage, and overall experience were all rated highly (between 3.8-4.2 out of 5). The quality of the overall experience was 4.0 out of 5.0, with 45.9% rating their overall experience as ‘excellent’.
- There were some notable variations in the overall quality of experience, with a more positive experience reported by the not-yet-married group relative to those who completed the survey after they had married. However, of even greater difference was the higher rating of quality reported by those taking their course more than three months prior to marriage (compared to those having their course less than three months before their marriage).
- The perceived effects of the course on improving understanding / views were generally positive (e.g. 57% perceived that marriage preparation had improved ‘Yourself, partner, relationship’).
- Reflecting the general satisfaction, 77% of people would recommend the course to their friends, although 11% would not.
- Comments highlighted the positive role of the providers, and the elements of Catholicism included in the marriage preparation. A minority of people, however, were less satisfied about the course not including sufficient attention to being a Catholic couple.
- In addition to the 11% who would not recommend the course, the 24% dissatisfied with the advance information, and the minority reporting dissatisfaction with the Catholic component of the course (immediately above), 10% felt that the course had diminished their understanding/views of the Catholic Church. Although in the minority, it would be valuable to understand more about these instances of dissatisfaction (see *Research recommendations*).

## Recruitment and support of marriage preparation providers

- Sustaining high quality providers is essential to the success of marriage preparation. Although there was no indication of the provider’s age in the survey (an important omission), the fact that over one-half (51%) of those surveyed had been running marriage preparation for over seven years *suggests* that recruiting new providers is a priority. This compares to 22% of providers practicing for three years or less.
- Is the concern over the recruitment of new providers warranted? Note that an experienced group of marriage preparation providers have, based on the couple experience, been delivering courses that are extremely well received. Moreover, those providers with more experience delivered more courses per year than newer recruits (see *Existing delivery and content of the marriage preparation programme*), and have maintained their professional development, with those practicing for more than seven years taking an average of 1.7 different types of training programmes for marriage preparation (more so than the newer recruits). It is not possible from

the data to compare couple course satisfaction with providers' length of service (as they were recorded in separate surveys).

- Fresh attempts to recruit new providers may not be operating as effectively as required, given that only 22% of providers have been practicing for three years or less.
- Nearly one-half (48%) of all providers were most often recruited after a request from 'someone already involved with marriage preparation'. Note that 38% of couples surveyed would consider training to become a course provider. The overall satisfaction with the preparation clearly extended beyond the individual's circumstance to a willingness to share their own positive experience with others.
- This suggests that 'word of mouth' or a direct recommendation may be an influential means of recruitment but, at the same time, this route is often more ad hoc and relies on the providers own judgement about the suitability of a potential provider. Also, the newer providers, compared to those serving for longer, were more likely to become involved through a direct recommendation from a provider.
- Although the couples were generally satisfied with their preparation, supporting providers in their role is equally important, as provider satisfaction may ultimately impact on couple experience.
- Most people had been trained through Marriage Care (59%), some 36 percentage point difference to the other options. Worryingly, however, a small but significant group (4%) reported no training at all and only 22% had been in receipt of 'regular professional development'.

#### **Existing delivery and content of the marriage preparation programme**

- A wide variety of personnel delivered marriage preparation courses. The three leading providers reported by couples were parish marriage preparation provider (28% of those couples surveyed reported this as their provider), Marriage Care Centre (26%) and Parish Priest (22%).
- There is no standardised length of course delivery, although the majority are usually around one day.
- The longer serving providers tended to deliver more courses per year compared to the newer recruits (perhaps unsurprisingly). These results illustrate how new providers will not necessarily mean an immediate increase in the number of courses, since it will take time for them to deliver the same amount of courses per year as the longer serving providers.
- The busiest months of delivery are within the first part of the year, with a further less substantial peak in Autumn. The busiest month (providers could tick more than one response) was March (55% of providers ticked this), followed closely by April (41%), February (40%), and May (40%). As expected this is opposite to the busiest months for marriage.
- Nearly one-half (47%) of providers stated that their programme was developed through 'an organisation' as opposed to them self, them self in a team, their Parish Priest or Diocese. Of these 'organisations', Marriage Care was by far the most represented (94%), thus mirroring earlier findings on provider training being delivered mostly by Marriage Care.
- There was a wide variety in topics covered in marriage preparation courses. The extent to which the 15 main topics were covered with a 'strong' or 'moderate' emphasis ranged from 53.1% (fertility awareness and family planning) to 98.2% (interpersonal communication and conflict management). This variation indicates that marriage preparation courses differ in their content, supported by the variation in length of courses shown previously. This finding may reflect the tailoring of courses to specific needs or the fact that only certain content can be delivered in the shortest of courses, and supports a need for a core or common curriculum.
- The top five topics share the theme of helping couples deal with changes and pressures that arise. These included interpersonal communication, conflict management, factors that sustain and protect relationships, pressures that can occur during the stages and changes of relationships, and commitment and work-life balance.

- When broken down into those responses that included a ‘strong emphasis’ as opposed to ‘strong’ or ‘moderate’ emphasis, interpersonal communication and conflict management were 20 and 15 percentage points ahead respectively, of the third topic (factors that sustain and protect relationships) at 88.2% and 83.2% respectively. This reinforces the point towards the overall emphasis of the course on the coping skills to sustain and preserve relationship harmony (as were other courses outlined in Chapter 2 – *Study context: Brief review of existing literature*).
- Despite being recognised as an increased time of relationship strain, the impact of parenthood was not included in 10% of programmes, and only included with a ‘strong emphasis’ in 41.9%. The topics most commonly not included were managing money (34.8% of courses did not include this); fertility awareness and family planning (30.0%); Christian life and service as a couple/family (27.9%); and issues arising from families of origin (12.0%). The latter two findings are pertinent given the proportion of interchurch marriages and that 41% of providers stated that the course did not facilitate interfaith issues.
- Providers were also asked (in an open ended non-quantifiable question) to express their views on how they saw the role of marriage preparation within the broader life and mission of the Church. The five key viewpoints were: Through 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.

#### **Policy and Guidelines for the future provision of marriage preparation (including delivery and content)**

- High-level policy comments regarding the delivery and implementation of marriage preparation were dominated by a request for an agreed national directive for marriage preparation. This was set to replace the varied types of provision at present, which is sometimes perceived as ad hoc..
- Underpinning a national policy on marriage preparation was the need for all groups (Providers, Bishops, Priests, etc.) to work together, and be clear about each others’ roles.
- The majority opinion was that marriage preparation should be compulsory for people getting married in a Catholic Church.
- There was a clear sense that people needed to be more aware about the provision of marriage preparation. Bringing people together at the national conference was essential and greatly appreciated. There were suggestions for a ‘structure’ (such as a designated staff post) in place at the Diocese level to foster this exchange of communication.
- There was a general belief that clearer communication of the value of marriage preparation from the Bishops and Priests would improve the take-up and co-ordination of Marriage preparation.
- The conference discussion groups showed three leading areas of content that were considered essential: Coping strategies and skills; spiritual aspects and helping couples to understand marriage as a sacrament better; and helping couples to get to know one another better, in particular understanding their differences and potential difficulties.
- The principle of having a core curriculum to follow was generally positive. Participants also mentioned that the core curriculum needed to be written in a manner that was easily interpretable.
- The principle of a core curriculum was rarely interpreted as meaning a standardised course. Most participants were opposed to having a curriculum that could be overly prescriptive. This flexibility towards meeting the specific needs of couples was seen as a key preference.
- There was a general consensus that conference participants saw the value of evaluation, and recognised it as being core to the future success of marriage preparation. However, it is clear that there are no guidelines about standardised measures and the central collation of the data.

There is a worrying percentage of courses that were not evaluated at all – 14% of courses from the couple survey and 4% from the Provider survey.

## **Recommendations for the future provision of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church**

Based on the independent assessment of the evidence presented in this report, this section concludes the study by listing recommendations for the future provision of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church. These recommendations are derived from the author's own independent assessment of the data. However, some recommendations were also derived from the professionals who were consulted in this research (especially conference participants).

Central to these recommendations is the desire for marriage preparation *to provide the best support possible for marriage*. The recommendations are presented under the following headings:

- Recommendations for provider recruitment
- Recommendations for couple recruitment
- Recommendations for course delivery
- Recommendations for course content
- High-level policy recommendations
- Research recommendations.

Each will now be presented in turn.

### **A) Recommendations for provider recruitment**

1. In order to boost the uptake of courses, and give couples the best support possible for their marriage, the evidence suggests a need for a corresponding increase in providers. Currently, only 22% of providers have been practicing for three years or less, implying a steady but an insubstantial process of recruiting new providers. This is compounded by the seasonal nature of delivery (provider demand differs across the year) and the fact that many providers (if recruited following their own marriage preparation course) are unlikely to be able to deliver the same number of courses per year compared to a longer serving provider. Therefore, if the intention is to increase the number of couples in receipt of marriage preparation, then the increase in the number of providers must occur well beforehand in order for them to be able to deliver more courses.
2. Recommendations to increase the recruitment of marriage preparation providers are:
  - Strategies to provide the offer (i.e. following up the interest from the evaluation form);
  - Give potential trainers an insight into roles; and
  - Maintain regular contact to ensure those interested would have the opportunity to express this, even if it was not apparent shortly after their own experience.
3. The 'direct recommendation' approach for recruitment may be insufficient to support a substantial increase in new providers. Consequently, it is recommended that a more standardised recruitment strategy is implemented.
4. The dominance of Marriage Care in training providers implies they may have important learning to share about recruiting providers for marriage preparation. It is recommended that steps are taken to share their experiences.



5. Supporting providers is key in maintaining course satisfaction as well as attracting more providers. It is essential that providers are given more training and support (including mentoring and networking) to improve the 'patchy' provision of training at present and continue the positive reception of marriage preparation courses.
6. Recommendations to increase the 'patchy' support for providers are:
  - innovative online resources;
  - mentoring and supervision (peer support);
  - events and conferences (national conferences, retreats, etc.); and
  - the establishment of a national network of providers (also seen as an important prerequisite in delivering courses tailored to the needs of the couple).
7. There is also a recommendation to recruit a more diverse range of providers to attract a greater variety of couples to marriage preparation.

## **B) Recommendations for couple recruitment**

1. Recommendations to boost couple uptake are:
  - More integrated support (from clergy and others within the Parish) generated from improved communication;
  - Offer innovative support options (e.g. online, school-based interventions) especially for younger people;
  - Regular prayer for those approaching marriage and newly-weds; and
  - Provision of ongoing and follow-up support (e.g. email newsletters, anniversary cards, Christmas cards, reunions, booster sessions, etc).
2. The broader, longer-term offer of marriage preparation could be perceived as a more attractive proposition to couples compared to the current one or two day course. Ideas to broaden the offer included improved forward planning to assess interest and raise awareness of follow-up, follow-up meetings, regular contact such as email newsletters, anniversary cards and Christmas cards, reunions, mentoring schemes to facilitate ongoing support, liturgies, and Prayer. Allowing couples to implement the information (e.g. through 'home-working') could also increase the dosage outside of the formal contact time with the preparation provider.
3. People's expectations of the course need to be raised beforehand as this is linked with positive impact. This could be enhanced by improving couples' knowledge about what to expect beforehand (including some of the longer term offers). More investigation into ways to improve this lower than average rating about what to expect beforehand is recommended.
4. It is worth considering the option of making the courses mandatory as a means of boosting the number of couples prepared. There is research evidence to suggest making courses mandatory will not have a detrimental effect on impact compared to voluntary courses.

## **C) Recommendations for course delivery**

1. It is recommended, based on the reviewed literature, that a team approach of delivery is implemented e.g. a lay person and a Priest. It is not certain as to the extent of this team delivery at present (as data are not available per course - see *Research recommendations*).
2. Although most programmes appear to be a day or less, the research evidence suggests that longer programmes should be considered – both in the lead up to marriage and beyond

marriage in the form of follow-up or 'refresher' sessions (especially as the impacts of the course are likely to diminish through time – see *Review evidence - Key content and delivery of marriage preparation programmes*). Options to extend sessions could be 'home-working' outside of the face-to-face contact or creating a blended course (a mixture of online and face-to-face delivery). However, it must also be understood that a programme may be perceived as being too long, so there is a need (through further research) to find out the optimum duration of a course.

3. There is no standardised length of course, which is reflected in the varying amount of content delivered. The idea of a standard length of course should be considered, although it should also maintain the option of being flexible to suit the needs of couples.
4. With 57% of couples from the survey cohabiting before marriage, there is an argument for offering marriage preparation earlier than the typical three to six months before marriage. Earlier programmes (at least three months prior to marriage) should be encouraged given that this is associated with greater satisfaction with the course (compared to those with a shorter interval and among those already married at the time of survey completion), although couples will be hard to identify prior to their notice of marriage. Encouraging marriage preparation at an earlier point may well help alleviate the seasonal variations in the courses that compound the need to recruit new providers.
5. In relation to the above point, there is evidence suggesting that even earlier, pre-coupling education, based on teaching young adults how to choose a spouse, is widely seen as having potential. Also, although perhaps not as relevant for Catholic couples, many couples will cohabit prior to engagement which has become more of a middle stage of a relationship. With the changing stages of relationship formation, earlier education may have a better impact.
6. It is recommended that the responses provided about the role of marriage preparation within the broader life and mission of the Church are shared. The five key viewpoints were: Through 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

#### **D) Recommendations for course content**

1. 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 transitions, factors protecting and sustaining relationships etc.). It is not necessary, therefore, to substantially overhaul the content delivered in the majority of programmes.
2. However, 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. This would support providers in delivering essential components around the coping skills to sustain and preserve relationship harmony.
3. Although the recommendation is for an easily interpretable core curriculum, there were strong preferences that it should not be a standardised course but one that could be adapted and tailored to couples' needs.

4. Additional areas of content that are recommended for consideration are: more acknowledgement that many couples may live together before marriage (also implying marriage preparation should come earlier than the most common period of between three and six months beforehand); the transition to parenthood; maintaining a strong focus on the spiritual aspects of the course and helping couples to understand sacramental marriage better (some comments of dissatisfaction here); increased understanding of the challenges of inter-faith marriages as these are likely to increase through time; relationship support options (and importance of seeking this early); and relational capability (e.g. understanding of relationships changes and stages, knowing that relationships can improve etc.).
5. Aside from the provision of information, the courses should allow couples to reflect on the information learnt in 'everyday life'. Theoretical evidence suggests the potential effectiveness of techniques such as Behavioural Modelling Training (BMT; based on Bandura's Social Learning Theory, 1977). BMT uses visual demonstrations of behaviours to promote knowledge acquisition and improvement in attitudes, intentions and self-efficacy. BMT can be used to show the importance of demonstrating and 'unlearning' negative communication styles from others (e.g. via video clips) and replacing with more positive styles of communication (e.g. additional video clips). Practising these skills, and seeking feedback (from self and others) about how these skills are implemented in 'everyday life' is essential.
6. Nonetheless, given the overall satisfaction with the existing courses, the recommendation is to focus more on changes to delivery and recruitment rather than changes in course content. This is based on the assumption that more courses would equate to more couples being equally satisfied.

#### **E) High-level policy recommendations**

1. There is a strong recommendation for an agreed national directive for marriage preparation. This is to replace the more ad hoc, varied means of couple and provider recruitment, course delivery and course content.
2. In relation, there is a strong recommendation to enhance the communication channels between the key personnel – Bishops, Priests, Providers, etc. to ensure all are aware about the developments in marriage preparation. The Bishop to Priest communication was seen as the most crucial as the Bishops need to support the Priests in referring couples to marriage preparation. Providers also need the backing from the Priests as part of this referral process.
3. It is recommended to promote conference events and consider the creation of a designated post or role at the Diocese level to support this greater integration of personnel.
4. Enhancing the evaluation (see *Research Recommendations*) and translating this evidence of effectiveness to all personnel would encourage Bishops and Priests to refer more couples to marriage preparation.

#### **F) Research recommendations**

It must be acknowledged at the outset that the survey samples are self-selecting (i.e. survey completion was optional) and limited in their coverage compared to the actual numbers of couples and providers available. It is recommended to extend the evaluation evidence in a number of ways, as follows:

1. A need to boost the survey numbers by promoting the survey more widely, using incentives, etc. A boost in the sample size would increase the argument about its representation of all those delivering and receiving marriage preparation.
2. It would be ideal, although problematic, to gather evidence from those choosing not to complete the survey. This could be achieved through making evaluation a compulsory part of the course, through incentives, or as a requirement of any follow-up offers. These non-responders may be the more 'dissatisfied customers' and may have several recommendations about how to improve the course. Also, although most were satisfied, exploring the isolated areas of dissatisfaction (e.g. 11% who would not recommend the course; 24% dissatisfied with the advance information; and 10% felt that the course had diminished their understanding/views of the Catholic Church) would be valuable information to support the improvement of the courses.
3. There is a need to collate the different evaluation data recorded after preparation e.g. telephone interviews, feedback forms – there appears to be no central repository for these data.
4. More course-specific questions in the survey would allow important variations in satisfaction according to: precise course content (aspects of the course that are most/least effective which could inform the core curriculum); type and number of provider(s) on the course; provider length of service; course length etc. At present the data are only available by town/city, which cannot be linked to a specific course and so elements of good practice are not able to be identified.
5. There is a recommendation to improve the questions in the surveys. For example, ensuring response options are mutually exclusive; increasing response categories in important areas such as length of service of providers (to have a wider range of length of service bands and a record of providers' age which may give a better indication of impending retirement); and more detail over what was included in the topics covered.
6. Longer follow-up to see the impacts of marriage preparation is recommended. Of interest would be the impact of marriage preparation on divorce, relationship quality, or impact of transition to parenthood, for example. This is particularly applicable given that most courses were delivered between one and six months prior to marriage and most people completing the survey were not yet married. This follow-up would also reduce the 'ceiling effect' of expected general satisfaction in the time leading to marriage at course completion, as well as note any diminishing impacts through time, and indicate the need for 'booster' or 'refresher' sessions. In connection to this point about survey completion, encouraging couples to complete their survey at similar times following their course would allow more meaningful comparisons (rather than comparing those who completed the survey immediately after the course to those completing it when they were married).
7. Improved evaluation designs need to be considered. For example, the random allocation of couples to receive different types of marriage preparation to see which types of delivery (e.g. online versus face-to-face) and content are more effective.
8. More research among prospective couples for marriage preparation could help work out what would increase their interest from the range of offers under consideration. For example, follow-up sessions, length of course, delivery options etc. Consultation with couples is essential.

9. A systematic review of the research evidence of marriage preparation (more so than in this study) with greater attention to those courses in the Catholic Community would provide essential learning for course delivery and content.

This evaluation evidence would be essential in demonstrating the value of the course, identifying areas of future refinement or further investigation, and conveying the benefits of marriage preparation to the Bishops and Priests who are so central to the course provision. Moreover, further research is required to assess the implementation of some of the recommendations posted in this final chapter. For example, the wide ranging suggestions for improving the recruitment of providers and couples; increasing the course length; making the course mandatory; courses at an earlier stage etc. need to be trialled, perhaps on a smaller scale, to see if they justify a more universal implementation.

### **Final comment**

A vast amount of evaluation data have been reviewed in this report. With the main aim of providing the best support possible for marriage it appears, on the whole, that the course is seen as a positive experience. This demonstrates the valuable role of the providers, the delivery, and content included in the course. There are, however, a number of areas that are in need of further investigation – especially in relation to boosting the recruitment of providers and couples. A recurring theme emerging from the data is the need for a more integrated, standardised style of course provision. There is notable variation in course delivery, content, routes for provider and couple recruitment, and course evaluation. For these variations to be addressed, a greater understanding of how marriage preparation is implemented is an important step. This report has contributed substantially towards this process.

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## **Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Community: An independent assessment of evaluation data**

### **Chapter 1 – Introduction, study aims, data to be analysed, and report structure**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

Since its peak of 44,931 in 1968, the number of Catholic marriages in England and Wales, has shown a steady decline to the most recent figure of 8,426 in 2009 (ONS, 2012). Of the religious marriage ceremonies held in 2008, 11.0% were within the Roman Catholic Church (ONS, 2012). Additionally, couple relationship breakdown has become common practice in England and Wales, with an estimated 45% of marriages predicted to end in divorce (Wilson & Smallwood, 2008). Cohabiting relationships, which have become increasingly more common (83.0% of all couples were cohabiting prior to marriage in 2009, as were 72.7% of couples having religious ceremonies – ONS, 2012), are associated with a higher likelihood of dissolution compared to marriage (Goodman & Greaves, 2010; Wilson & Stuchbury, 2010)<sup>1</sup>. In this climate of relationship formation and dissolution, it is paramount to assess the effectiveness of marriage preparation.

This study provides an independent and informed review of the data collected from an enquiry into marriage preparation in the Catholic Church in England and Wales during 2010-11. The data were generated from a range of couples in receipt of marriage preparation (surveyed 2010), marriage preparation providers (surveyed 2010), and participants at a National Catholic Marriage Preparation Conference 2011.

The ultimate goal of this study is to ensure that *couples married within the Catholic Church receive the best support possible for their marriage*. In order to meet this goal, the report will present evidence on the current state of marriage preparation, and identify effective practices and areas of provision which would benefit from greater attention and investment in the future. The intention, in light of the data available, is to provide recommendations for future marriage preparation in the Catholic Church in terms of content/delivery, take-up by couples, and high-level policy.

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<sup>1</sup> Although relationships are more likely to dissolve in cohabitations compared to those married, the evidence suggests that this is not due to the relationship status *per se* but reflects more of a difference between those people who choose to marry compared to those who choose to cohabit (as in a selection effect).

## 1.2 Study aims

To provide the best support possible for marriage, the specific objectives of the research as prescribed by the Catholic Bishops' Committee for Marriage and Family Life, are to:

1. Provide scrutiny to the initial analysis of both the survey data and the conference outputs;
2. In relation to the conference recommendation to develop Guidelines/Core Curriculum for marriage preparation (i.e. content and delivery), to assess what evidence of effective practice exists to support this work;
3. To identify contradictions between findings from the couple and provider feedback;
4. To identify, in view of the above, future recommendations and priorities for action.

## 1.3 Data to be analysed

There were a variety of data available for further scrutiny and analysis. Findings were derived from two cross-sectional surveys (2010) and a national conference (2011). The two surveys were as follows<sup>2</sup>:

- An online cross-sectional, questionnaire-based survey self-completed by 116 individuals prepared for marriage during 2010. This comprised a total of 23 questions on profile and experiences of marriage preparation;
- An online cross-sectional, questionnaire-based survey self-completed by 242 marriage preparation providers in England and Wales during 2010. This comprised a total of 22 questions on profile and programme provision.

Both surveys also included open-ended responses which have been incorporated in this report where they illustrate some of the related findings. For the couple survey, this was in relation to suggested areas of additional content and a general 'additional comments' section. For the providers, this was mainly in terms of *'How does your ministry preparing couples for marriage contribute to the life of the Church?'*. There was also an opportunity for providers to elaborate on 'other' responses connected to their involvement in marriage preparation, including additional training received; programme development; times expected to deliver the course; specifying how

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<sup>2</sup> Both sets of survey data downloaded on March 21<sup>st</sup> 2012, direct from Survey Monkey to SPSS.

interfaith issues are dealt with; length of the programme; and a catch-all opportunity for 'extra comments'.

The surveys arose from a proposal from the Committee for Marriage and Family Life to examine marriage preparation in the Catholic Church in England and Wales, in order to explore options for growth. The survey questions were designed by practitioners, diocesan coordinators of family ministry and the Bishops' Committee for Marriage and Family Life to discover more about personnel, programme content and impact.

The national conference (November 2011) provided an opportunity to share the findings from the survey data and use them as a trigger for further reflection from the conference participants. The conference generated two further sets of data as follows:

- Post-it responses from 190 conference participants (working in discussion groups of approximately six people) in response to seven key questions (identified from the survey data by the conference Working Group) around recruitment, provision, and content of marriage preparation. An approximate total of 300 discussion group responses;
- Further recommendations, via an evaluation form, from 105 conference participants (mainly marriage preparation providers, service managers, including Priests). A total of 105 participants provided a response from a total of 131 invited to do so (80.2% response rate).

In addition to these data, there were two interim reports completed by Project Office interns. These were essentially summaries of the data and are surpassed by this report.

#### **1.4 Report structure**

To provide an essential context to the study, the report will commence by introducing two sets of data as follows:

- A brief summary of the international literature assessing the effectiveness (including content and delivery where possible) of marriage preparation and education programmes (Chapter 2);
- An outline of the profile of research participants (couples and providers completing the survey) (Chapter 3).

Having provided this important context, the main body of the report will present findings in the following four sections:

- Recruitment of couples and their views of marriage preparation (Chapter 4);
- Recruitment and support of marriage preparation providers (Chapter 5);
- Existing content and delivery of the marriage preparation programme (Chapter 6);
- Policy and Guidelines for the future provision of marriage preparation (including delivery and content) (Chapter 7).

Each of the chapters will include a summary of key points which will help contribute to a closing chapter providing overall recommendations and priorities for future action (Chapter 8).

## **Chapter 2 – Study context: Brief review of existing literature**

This chapter will present a brief review of the existing literature on marriage preparation. This is important for drawing reference to existing evidence of effective practice as outlined in the study objectives.

Marriage preparation takes an early preventative approach by aiming to avoid relationship problems developing. To avoid relationship problems, programmes typically focus on raising awareness about couple relationships, explore issues that affect the quality of relationships, and build on key inter-relational skills. Marriage preparation, as reported in this chapter, may also have a strong faith element, focusing on the sacrament of marriage and marital spirituality from a Christian perspective.

From a review of the international literature, there has only been one noteworthy study of marriage preparation specifically conducted in the Catholic Church (Center for Marriage and Family, 1997 [data collected in 1994]). This study will be summarised first. However, given that the data for this study were collected some 18 years ago, this chapter will also draw findings from early preventative programmes that are delivered to couples *not* in the Catholic Church. Also, the review will be extended to preparation programmes among those who are newly married, as well as those in committed relationships prior to marriage. These studies are relevant given their scope and the sheer amount of data collected. After a brief review of the studies, this chapter will conclude by listing a set of key findings. This will allow the conference recommendations around Guidelines/Core Curriculum for marriage preparation to be matched against what is implemented elsewhere.

### **2.1 Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church**

The (US-based) Center for Marriage and Family was commissioned by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to carry out a nationwide study of the impact of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church. As a limitation, there is no available information on the study design, methods, sampling strategy or sample size<sup>3</sup>.

The overall conclusion from the study was the positive receipt of marriage preparation. To illustrate, the vast majority (93.8%) of respondents in the first year of the survey perceived their experience of

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<sup>3</sup> Confirmed by email correspondence with the Center for Marriage and Family.

marriage preparation to be 'valuable'<sup>4</sup>. The equivalent figure for the second year of questioning was (78.4%). By the eighth year (and final year of follow-up) of marriage only 47.4% of respondents agreed their experience of marriage preparation was valuable. Interestingly the diminishing value reported through time could be due to various reasons, including early difficulties in marriage, or over-valuing the importance of marriage preparation soon after the course (see reference to a 'ceiling effect' later in this chapter). The Center for Marriage and Family suggests the need for booster sessions throughout the various stages of a marriage to sustain the positive responses reported soon after the course.

The respondents thought that marriage preparation was most beneficial when delivered as part of a team i.e. a combination of Clergy, lay couples, and Parish staff. Clergy working alone was deemed the least valuable, although a team approach that did not include a Clergy representative was also seen as less valuable than a team approach. In terms of content, the areas considered most valuable were: communication, commitment, conflict resolution, children, and Church. Although information about dual careers is also commonly delivered, this was found to be least valuable. Interestingly the paper's conclusion to this latter finding was to improve the delivery of information about dual careers rather than omitting it from the course.

For some respondents in this study, the attendance of marriage preparation was a mandatory requirement, while for others attendance was voluntary. There was no difference in the value attached to the course (implying that the mandatory nature of attendance did not impinge on its value). There was also a positive correlation with course value and intensity, but only up until the ideal provision of 8-9 sessions. Too few sessions were seen of less value as were too many, with 8-9 sessions being the optimum for course value (although there is no indication what constituted a session). Also of interest, the course value was positively correlated with prior experiences of religious education, supporting the case for the Church to engage its members, in schools for example, when the issues of relationships first begin to appear.

The study also found that people who had high expectations of the marriage preparation courses reported the highest value. It is rightly concluded, therefore, that providers of marriage preparation may be able to boost the value of the course if they are able to raise expectations beforehand. This prior communication about the course also relates to sharing with prospective course participants what to expect beforehand.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Value' is a term used in the Center for Marriage and Family report. It is not known how 'value' was defined or measured.

The rest of the study paper discusses inter-Church couples (which comprised 39% of the sample) given that these relationships were the most likely to drift from the Catholic Church. Interest in this area extended to a further study exploring whether the faith of inter-Church couples is in any way different to same-faith marriages; the predisposing factors couples bring to inter-Church marriages; and differences in marital quality and stability between inter-Church and same-Church marriages. Given that this is one aspect of marriage preparation, and it was conducted in the US, this further study has not been summarised here (see Lawler et al., 1999 for more detail). As a point of attention, Lawlor and colleagues at the Center for Marriage and Family (Creighton University) in the US are arguably the leading researchers, from a single institution, that have published research about marriage in the Catholic Community. A list of their publications is shown in Appendix 1.

## **2.2 Non-Faith Marriage Preparation Programmes**

The effectiveness of (non-faith specific) early preventative programmes of marital discord has received recent interest, particularly in the United States and Australia. There have been three timely reviews (i.e. drawing evidence from several studies at a time) that have focused on the effectiveness of these programmes. These reviews include meta-analyses, meaning that they have collated the evidence from a number of studies and have been able to calculate, statistically, the effectiveness of these programmes as a whole. These reviews have been undertaken by Hawkins et al (2008), Halford et al (2008) and Fawcett et al (2010). Although these studies concentrate on evidence of effectiveness, where possible, detail around the components of the early preventative programmes (content and delivery) will be highlighted.

The Hawkins et al (2008) meta analysis included 86 reports of Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) programmes dating back to 1976. From these reports (including quasi<sup>5</sup>-experimental and experimental designs), they analysed data from 117 predominantly US published and unpublished studies which generated more than 500 effect sizes (see Footnote 6). In this review, the majority of the couples were already married. The main outcome measures of these psycho-educational (rather than therapeutic) programmes, used to indicate effectiveness, were couple relationship quality and communication skills. The inclusion of unpublished studies is particularly interesting in that those with larger effect sizes may be more likely to be published and, therefore, an exclusive focus on published studies may inflate the true effect size.

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<sup>5</sup> Differ to experimental designs in that intervention and control groups are not assigned randomly.



Both outcome measures (relationship quality and communication skills) were assessed in various ways, using a combination of different scales and questions. Most studies that were reviewed examined one or both of these measures before the intervention, immediately after and up to six months later. Very few had recorded longer-term impacts of MRE which is a distinct limitation in assessing effectiveness. From the 117 studies analysed, there were notable variations in relationship length (prior to MRE), although the majority included White, middle-class and married couples reporting minimal distress.

Hawkins et al (2008) describe the effects of MRE on relationship quality in experimental studies as *“modest but generally significant – ranging from .24 to .36”* (p.726)<sup>6</sup>, with smaller effects in quasi-experimental studies from .15 to .29. The results included those studies that had follow-up assessments indicating that the effects of the intervention had not reduced substantially over the (albeit limited) timeframes of the studies reviewed. For communication skills, the effects sizes were again greater in experimental studies, ranging from .36 to .54, compared to quasi-experimental studies (.14 to .29).

These results show that the impacts on communication skills are more substantial than on relationship quality. Hawkins et al (2008) suggest this may be because most of the programmes concentrated on communication skills and the effects were derived from observation (that may lead participants to demonstrate such skills to researchers which they may not use to such an extent in natural settings). The difference between the strength of the effects seen in the experimental and quasi-experimental studies might be explained by the non-random allocation to the MRE programme or control condition in the quasi-experimental studies, which could have resulted in people with greater relationship need being more likely to choose the MRE intervention. Therefore, the pre-test differences between the MRE groups and the control group that were likely to be evident in the quasi-experimental studies (unlike in a random allocation situation) may have reduced the effect sizes. Moreover, although there was no difference in the MRE effects on men and women, moderate-dosage programmes tended to have a larger effect size than low-dosage programmes.

The authors conclude as follows:

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<sup>6</sup> An effect size is the strength of the statistical relationship between, in this instance, receipt of MRE and relationship quality and communication skills. There is no single statistical test to create an effect size. For example, in a Pearson's correlation, small, medium and large effect sizes would be typically .10; .30; and .50 respectively. Cohen's *d* outlines that an effect size of 0.2 to 0.3 might be 'small' and around 0.5 as 'medium'. These are generally in tune with Hawkins et al (2008) conclusion of a *“modest but generally significant effect on relationship quality”*. To put into context, Hawkins et al (2008) also note similar effect sizes for other programmes such as teenage pregnancy prevention and alcohol and drug use prevention.

*“Our primary analyses, which focused on experimental studies that clearly address efficacy, demonstrated that MRE produces significant, moderate effect sizes on two different outcomes that were commonly examined in MRE studies [relationship quality and communication skills].....Moreover, when follow-up assessments were employed and evaluated, there was not much evidence of diminishing effects”.* (Hawkins et al, 2008, p.730).

Of relevance to marriage preparation in this context, and the prospect of developing a set of content Guidelines or a Core Curriculum, it is important to note what elements of communication skills and relationship quality were included in the programmes. Hawkins et al (2008) outline that communication skills generally concentrated on problem-solving, diminishing criticism and contempt, and improving listening skills (with couples encouraged to practise these). In terms of relationship quality, the programmes tended to concentrate on those elements that correlate strongly with quality such as aligning expectations, managing finances, sharing household chores, minimising conflict, and agreement about time together. Marital quality also picks up on the important virtues such as commitment and forgiveness.

A further review, this time of Couple Relationship Education (CRE), was undertaken by Halford and colleagues (2008). They define CRE as the *“provision of structured education to couples about relationship knowledge, attitudes and skills”* (p.497), and so there are clear parallels to marriage preparation in the Catholic Community as well as the MRE reported above. However, although CRE began as a pre-marriage offer, with an emphasis on prevention, its scope has widened to include, for example, marriage enrichment and couples having a child together. In its present form CRE (like MRE) is not offered exclusively to couples prior to marriage. Also, in similar fashion to MRE, the main focus of this curriculum-based CRE is on key relationship skills such as conflict management (typically 12-15 programme hours). The authors state the evidence of effectiveness as follows:

*“Meta-analyses consistently show that skills-training CRE is associated with large effect size increases in relationship skills ( $d > 0.7$ ).....Skills-training CRE is also associated with small to moderate short-term effect size increases in relationship satisfaction, with larger effects evident in couples that initially have lower levels of satisfaction.”* (Halford et al, 2008, p.500).

As with MRE, the impacts on communications skills generally exceed those on relationship quality. However, Halford et al (2008) also note that there are *“substantial limitations in our knowledge of*

*the efficacy of CRE*” (p.503) due to the limited numbers of Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) reporting long-term impacts (beyond 12 months), no evidence on divorce rates and evidence largely confined to White and highly-educated people.

In terms of the Guidelines/Core Curriculum, Halford et al (2008) present a useful review of the components within their reviewed programmes, noting how there is a clear overlap between them. They start by reviewing inventory-based programmes which are designed to give couples detailed feedback about relationship strength and weakness based on the assumption that this feedback will help improve the couple’s relationship. They cite three inventory-based programmes: PREmarital Preparation and Relationship Enhancement (PREPARE); the Facilitating Open Couple Communication Understanding and Study (FOCCUS); and RELATionship Evaluation (RELATE). In examining the components of each, Halford et al (2008) note that all three programmes emphasise realistic relationship expectations, effective communication, exposure to negative family-of-origin experiences, and personal stress management. They also note that evaluation evidence is generally limited, although two RCTs (based on RELATE) showed that CRE, increased couples’ immediate relationship satisfaction and commitment to the relationship.

In contrast to the inventory-based approach, the curriculum-based approach to CRE concentrates more on skills, including communication and conflict management. Most of these programmes also promote relationship knowledge and attitudes (e.g. realistic, shared relationship expectations) and the forging of positive connections and commitment. The skills-training includes modelling, rehearsal, and feedback of skills (clearly beyond the scope of a typically one day marriage preparation programme in this context), as well as activities promoting beliefs and attitudes associated with healthy relationships.

They cite three curriculum-based CRE programmes: the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Programme (PREP – Markman et al., 2004); Couple Commitment and Relationship Enhancement (Couple CARE – Halford et al., 2004); and Couple Communication – (Miller et al., 1975). Of interest to the Guidelines/Core Curriculum, they note shared areas of content as developing shared realistic expectations, positive communication, and effective conflict management. Content offered in some of the curriculum-based programmes include the prevention of destructive conflict (PREP) and partner empathy (CARE).

Given the evaluation evidence noted above, these skills-based areas of content appear to be having a positive impact on couple relationships. Significantly, the authors note that the greatest beneficiaries of CRE, in terms of sustained enhancement of relationship satisfaction, are likely to be those in early-stage relationships (such as those prior to marriage). Interestingly, although some of the programmes include supporting resources and materials, as well as innovative web-based provision, the evidence of their effectiveness is limited.

The most recent of reviews, including a meta-analysis, was undertaken by Fawcett and colleagues (2010). This study was in contrast to the above two non-faith specific reviews in that it is focussed exclusively on pre-marital education. In line with above reviews, however, Fawcett et al (2010) note the effects on the two main outcomes of such programmes being communication skills and relationship satisfaction. They analysed data from 28 studies between 1975 and 2008, generating 47 studies for coding. Most of the couples had been in a relationship for less than two years, with most aged 21 to 30 years. Again, as in the above reviews, most couples were from middle-class, highly-educated backgrounds.

In terms of results, the authors note how the inclusion of unpublished studies reduced the significance of the effects of pre-marital education on relationship quality (as in the Hawkins et al 2008 review). The authors also describe studies reporting limited impacts on outcomes as a 'ceiling effect' whereby engaged couples have little room for improvement in their relationship quality as would be expected just prior to marriage. However, when including published studies alone, they reported a statistically significant (small) increase in relationship quality ( $d=.578$ ,  $p<0.05$ ,  $k=8$ )<sup>7</sup> and a greater increase in communication skills ( $d=.986$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $k=7$ ).

Again, tying in this review to the Guidelines/Core curriculum, there are a number of important observations around content. Fawcett et al (2010) recognise the importance of teaching communication and problem-solving skills (justified by the statistically significant effects). However, they also recognise that there is a difference between learning these skills and implementing them in everyday life (with an emphasis on modelling, rehearsing and practising). Also, they argue that

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<sup>7</sup> The d statistic is the correlation coefficient indicating the strength of the relationship between pre-marital education and either relationship quality or communication skills in this context. The size of the coefficient indicates the statistical significance in the p value. A p value of  $<0.05$  indicates that there is less than a 5% likelihood that this difference could be created by chance (rather than indicating a correlation between marital education and outcomes). A p of  $<0.001$  indicates a less than 0.1% likelihood of this effect being due to chance (hence a stronger correlation).

greater effects of pre-marital education could be achieved by customising the training to the specific needs of the couple.

Interestingly, Fawcett et al (2010) outline innovative strategies to increase the effects of pre-marital education. They mention timing as a key issue given that many couples cohabit prior to engagement, a period which has become more of a middle stage of a relationship (although this may not apply to such an extent in a Catholic community), and question whether earlier education may have a stronger impact. They also mention the idea of pre-coupling education based on teaching young adults how to choose a spouse wisely (with content adjusted appropriately). In reference to the Guidelines/Core Curriculum, they argue for the greater inclusion of the transformative processes of marriage, such as commitment, sacrifice, forgiveness, generosity, goodwill, other-centeredness and self-control. They also note how traditional pre-marital education, which emphasises the communication-satisfaction model, may be unintentionally reinforcing the individualistic view of marriage, rather than including these wider outcomes listed above. In relation, Cherlin (2004) wrote about the 'Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage', noting a significant shift in the 1960s and 1970s from the 'companionate' marriage to the 'individualized' marriage. He aligns this shift with an increased emphasis on personal choice, characterised by rising divorce trends and declines in modern day marriage.

### **Summary points from Chapter 2 – Study context: Brief review of existing literature**

It is fortunate that there is one exclusively Catholic-based study and three more substantial studies (one review and two meta-analyses) that are able to demonstrate the effectiveness of relationship education/preparation. Although only two deal specifically with pre-marital education, the additional reviews of Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) and Couple Relationship Education (CRE) programmes do bear relevance to the Guidelines/Core Curriculum of marriage preparation in the Catholic community. Given that the impacts of these programmes are shown to be statistically significant, more so in terms of communication rather than relationship quality (not withholding the limitations reported), it is appropriate to conclude by listing key areas of content, followed by people's thoughts and suggestions for future delivery. These will serve as an important benchmark to the forthcoming evaluation evidence.

### **a) Key content for education/preparation programmes**

- ✓ Imparting relationship knowledge (e.g. relationship stages and changes, times of relationship strain) appears to be the bedrock of the reviewed programmes.
- ✓ Two further key areas of content are communication skills and relationship quality – both have been shown to improve after marriage preparation (former more so than the latter) with neither showing significant diminishing effects through a short period of follow-up (rarely more than one year).
- ✓ Communication skills are more easily transferred to couples, compared to actual increases in relationship quality (compounded by a ‘ceiling effect’ of relatively high relationship quality during preparation for marriage).
- ✓ Core communication skills include problem-solving, diminishing criticism and contempt, and improving listening skills.
- ✓ To improve relationship quality, core components concentrate on those factors that correlate strongly with quality such as aligning expectations, managing finances, sharing household chores, and agreement about time together.
- ✓ Improvements in relationship quality can also be embedded in the important virtues such as commitment and forgiveness as well as elements specific to the Catholic Church.
- ✓ Minimising conflict and, where this occurs, knowing how to manage this conflict is an integral part of the programmes. More specifically, the prevention of destructive conflict and encouragement of constructive conflict are important elements.
- ✓ Further areas of content, derived from inventory- and curriculum-based programmes include having realistic relationship expectations, exposure to negative family-of-origin experiences, personal stress management, listening skills and partner empathy, commitment, bringing up children, and managing a dual career.

- ✓ There is also supporting evidence for content around the transformative processes of marriage, such as commitment, sacrifice, forgiveness, generosity, goodwill, other-centeredness and self-control.
- ✓ There is some argument for the content of marriage preparation programmes to be customised to the specific needs of the couple.

#### **b) Thoughts and Suggestions for Future Delivery**

- ✓ A team approach to the delivery was preferable i.e. a combination of Clergy, lay couples and Parish staff.
- ✓ In general, moderate-dosage programmes tend to have a larger effect size (greater impact) than low-dosage programmes. Allowing couples to implement the information (e.g. through 'home-working') could increase the dosage outside of the formal contact time with the preparation provider. One study found that the value of the course increased up to a peak of 8-9 sessions following which a decline in value was reported (although there was no indication of what constituted a 'session').
- ✓ For the one study that followed up couples extensively (i.e. for several years) after they completed the course, the value of marriage preparation tended to diminish through time. This suggests a need for 'booster' sessions throughout the various stages of marriage.
- ✓ There was no difference in the value attached to course according to whether they were mandatory or voluntary. This has implications for those supporting the case for courses to be mandatory.
- ✓ Those reporting high expectations of the marriage preparation courses reported the highest value. Raising people's expectations beforehand is important as is informing people about what to expect before taking the course.
- ✓ To improve communication skills, the training must allow time beyond purely the provision of information and raising awareness. Behavioural Modelling Training (BMT) highlights the importance of seeing examples of positive (and negative) communication styles, practising these

skills, and seeking feedback (from self and others) about how these skills are implemented. Likewise, learning and implementing these skills in the context of everyday life and when they are required (beyond the marriage preparation course) is a core component of delivery.

- ✓ Supporting resources and materials, and innovative web-based delivery, may well encourage a greater impact on couples, although the evidence of their effectiveness is limited.
- ✓ As well as curriculum-based programmes, there is some evidence that inventory-based programmes are effective. These are designed to give couples detailed feedback about relationship strength and weakness based on the assumption that this feedback will help improve the couple's relationship.
- ✓ The timing of preparation programmes is important. Although perhaps not as relevant for Catholic couples, many couples will cohabit prior to engagement which has become more of a middle stage of a relationship. With the changing stages of relationship formation, earlier education may have a stronger impact. At an even earlier stage, the idea of pre-coupling education based on teaching young adults how to choose a spouse widely is seen as having potential (with content adjusted appropriately). Also, those people who reported prior religious education about relationships reported greater value to their marriage preparation.

Although the above points are taken from the most recent of published studies, it is important to be aware that the marriage preparation courses run by Marriage Care are currently being evaluated, under the funding of the Department of Education. The author of this report is a member of the steering group for this evaluation and so will be in a prime position to feedback and report on when these findings will be published (estimated Spring 2013). Also, although this is a brief review to support this evaluation report, it may be useful for the Catholic Bishops' Conference to consider a more extensive review, in particular drawing on the evidence from Creighton University and other institutions that have written more extensively about marriage in the Catholic Community. Learning more about marriage in this context is likely to have implications for the content and delivery of marriage preparation (see Chapter 8, *Overall recommendations and priorities for future action*).



## Chapter 3 – Study context: Profile of survey respondents

The second part of the context will outline the profile of the survey respondents (couples and providers). This is important in understanding who provided the findings outlined in the main body of the report.

### 3.1 Couple survey

Of the 116 people who completed the online couple questionnaire 20.9% reported that their partner had also taken the survey. Couples lived in 53 different towns/cities, with marginally greater representation from London (25 people / 23%)<sup>8</sup> and Chester (23 people / 20%).

This geographical spread was, as expected, mirrored in the Dioceses involved. Of the 23 Dioceses, the greatest numbers of respondents (34 or 28%) came from the diocese of Shrewsbury. These basic distributions show that marriage preparation (according to the couple survey) was not confined to a particular region in England and Wales, representing the South (e.g. Poole, Winchester), North (e.g. Hexham, Ormskirk), East (e.g. Dover, Ipswich) and West regions (e.g. Exeter, Llandudno). The majority of weddings (72%) reflected in the couple survey took place in the UK. Over one-half (59%) were Catholic-Catholic and 22% Catholic-Christian of another denomination, and the remainder were Catholic and a person of another faith, Catholic-Agnostic or Catholic-Atheist.

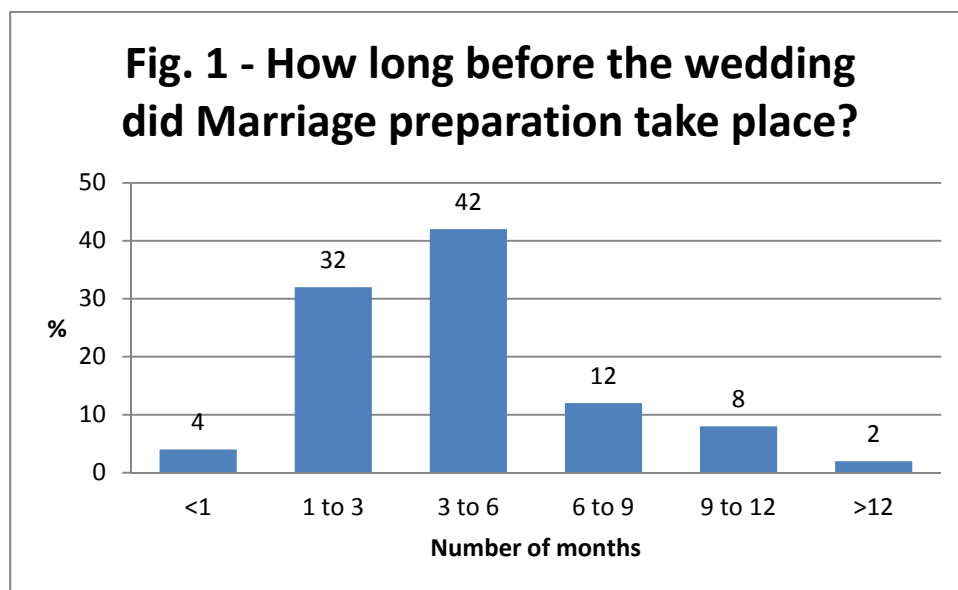
The majority of people responding to the survey appeared to have done so shortly after their marriage preparation course (given that only 24% reported their marital status as 'married' – 76% were yet to marry). This indicates that the survey was completed when the course was relatively fresh in their minds and therefore provides a reasonably accurate recall of this experience. For the majority (55%), marriage preparation courses are for a day or less, assuming that a 'series of evenings' and weekend constitute more than one day (excluding 'other'). These typically one day courses tend to concur with the provider responses (see later in this chapter).

Again of interest, the majority of people (60%) had been 'courting' (term used in the survey) for between two and five years inclusive. The months in which marriage preparation was most

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<sup>8</sup> All percentages in this report are derived from the proportion of people who provided a valid response (i.e. excludes missing data or those that did not answer the question). Note also in later charts and tables, the figures do not always total 100% - this is either due to more than one response option being available or due to the rounding up or down of percentages where only one response option is available.

commonly undertaken were skewed towards the first part of the year (46% during February, March and April – matched by the busiest months indicated by providers see Figure 14 in Chapter 6, *Existing delivery and content of the marriage preparation programme*). Marriage ceremonies were mostly in the months of August and September (40% of all marriages). This is replicated in the period during which marriage preparation took place prior to the wedding, as illustrated below in Figure 1<sup>9</sup>. For the sample as a whole, the majority of people (74%) completed their marriage preparation course between one and six months before their wedding:



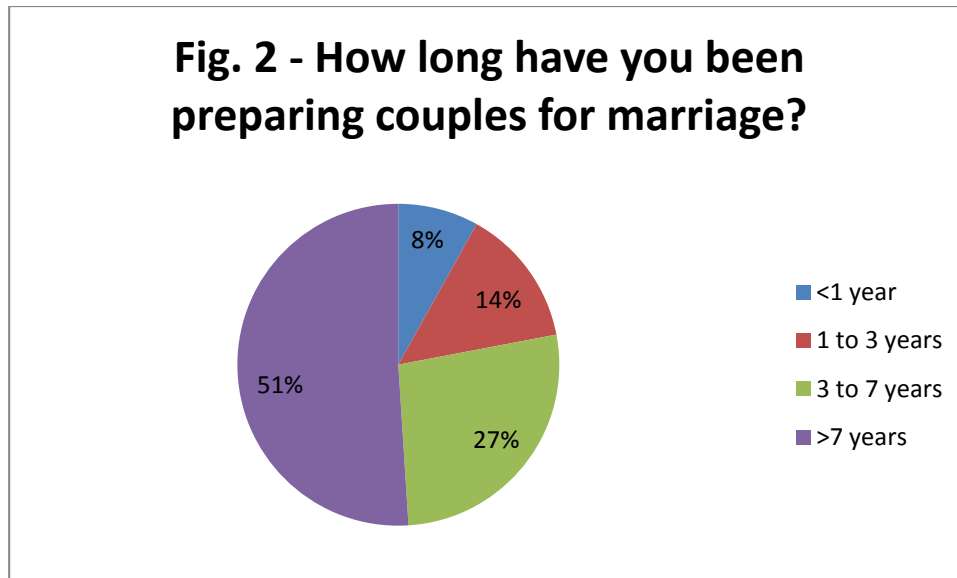
When presenting more detailed findings, such as satisfaction and quality of the overall experience, the extent to which these headline findings vary according to some of the characteristics outlined above will be described.

### 3.2 Provider survey

Of the 242 responses to the online provider survey, 29 entered their responses as pairs and it is not known whether one or both members of this pair completed the survey (although for some of the questions it would not make any difference whether one or both provided a response). As for the couple survey, a range of different locations (142) were given throughout England and Wales by the providers. The majority (80%) of the providers were a 'Lay Person', rather than an Ordained Priest or Deacon, or a Religious Sister or Brother. 82% identified themselves as married. Of interest to later

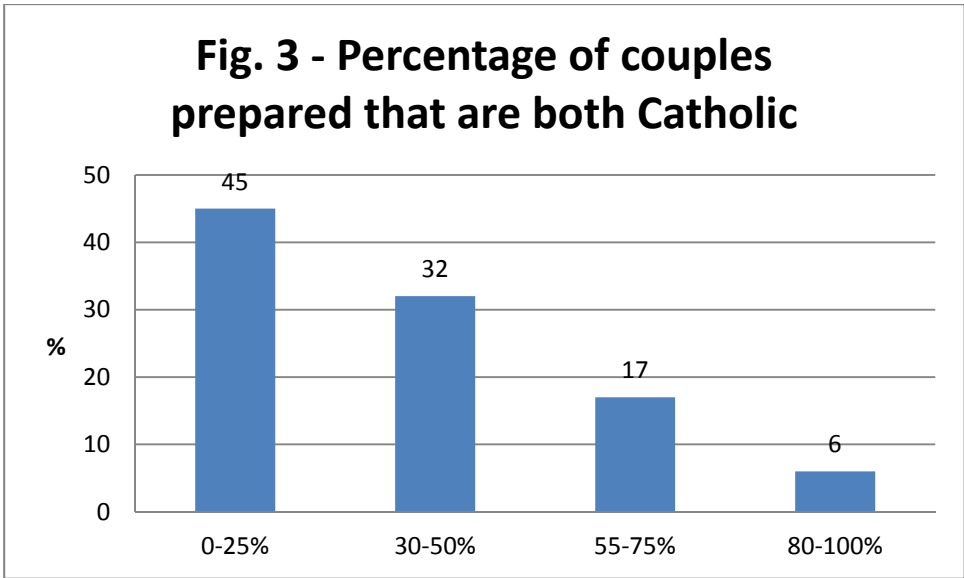
<sup>9</sup> There are occasional errors in the design of the questions that this report has been asked to analyse. In this case, the response options are not mutually exclusive so a person taking the course (for example) 3 months prior to their wedding date could have two valid options to choose from.

findings in this report (Chapter 5, *Recruitment and support of Marriage Preparation providers*), the majority (51%) of providers had been preparing couples for marriage for more than seven years, with only 22% for three years or less – See Figure 2:



A further parallel with the couple survey was the proportion of couples prepared that were both Catholic (Figure 3). Of those that knew the religious status of their couples (i.e. excludes the ‘unknown’ responses), 45% of providers stated that a quarter or less of their couples were both Catholic (compared to 6% of providers reporting that between 80% and 100% of their couples were both Catholic). Clearly the majority experience of providers is to prepare couples that are not both Catholic, although the majority were both Christian (6% of providers stated that between 80% and 100% of their couples were both Catholic compared to an equivalent figure of 54% of couples who were both Christian). This matches the experience reported in the couple survey<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Where similar evidence is provided from two different sources, this provides extra validity to the findings.



Finally, the proportion of providers who reported their courses as eight hours or less was 78%, although an earlier question on the provider survey showed that 53% reported they delivered courses for a day or less (which is closer to the finding from the couple survey).

**Summary points from Chapter 3 – Study context: Profile of survey respondents**

- ✓ Presenting a profile of the survey respondents is important in understanding who provided the findings outlined in the main body of the report. 116 people completed the couple survey and 242 completed the provider survey.
- ✓ Although the dominant locations for marriage preparation were London and Chester, courses were held in a wide variety of regions in England and Wales.
- ✓ There was a notable proportion of inter- church marriages reported by couples: 59% were Catholic-Catholic and 22% Catholic-Christian of another denomination, and the remainder were Catholic and a person of another faith, Catholic-Agnostic or Catholic-Atheist. From the provider survey, 45% stated that a quarter or less of their couples were both Catholic (compared to 6% of providers reporting that between 80% and 100% of their couples were both Catholic).
- ✓ Interestingly, the majority of people responding to the survey appeared to have done so shortly after their marriage preparation course (given that 76% were still to marry and 74% completed their course between one and six months before their wedding). This indicates that the survey

was completed when the course was relatively fresh in their minds and therefore provides a reasonably accurate recall of this experience.

- ✓ For the majority of couples (55%), marriage preparation courses are for a day or less (assuming a 'series of evenings' and weekend constitute more than one day, and excluding 'other'). The proportion of providers who reported their courses as eight hours or less was 78%, although an earlier question on the provider survey showed that 53% reported they delivered courses for a day or less (which is closer to the finding from the couple survey).
- ✓ The majority (80%) of the providers were a 'Lay Person', rather than an Ordained Priest or Deacon, or a Religious Sister or Brother, and 82% were married.
- ✓ The majority (51%) of providers had been preparing couples for marriage for more than seven years, with only 22% for three years or less. It must be recognised that this question only reveals length of service, whereas more detail on the provider's age or a wider range of service bands (up to, for example, 20 years) would provide a greater insight into any impending retirements from service and the need for new recruits.

Having placed the study into context, the main body of the report will now turn its attention to the key findings. Central to these findings is how to ensure that couples married within the Church receive the best support possible for their marriage. As noted previously, these findings are presented in four main sections, and each will include a summary of key points:

- Recruiting couples and their views of marriage preparation (Chapter 4)
- Recruitment and support of marriage preparation providers (Chapter 5)
- Existing content and delivery of the marriage preparation programme (Chapter 6)
- Policy and Guidelines for the future provision of marriage preparation (including content and delivery) (Chapter 7).

This will be followed by a summary of findings and a set of recommendations for future action (Chapter 8).

## **Chapter 4 – Recruitment of couples and their views of Marriage Preparation**

This chapter concentrates on the reasons for taking the course, satisfaction ratings, quality ratings, perceived impact data, and introduces some of the ideas for future recruitment.

### **4.1 Introduction**

One means of enhancing the effectiveness of marriage preparation is to increase the numbers of couples in receipt of the offer. With the decline in couples marrying in the Catholic Church (see Chapter 1 – *Introduction, study aims, data to be analysed, and report structure*), this is an area of obvious interest. This chapter presents findings in this most fundamental of areas and provides an important context to other influencing factors outlined in later sections (i.e. the nature of the providers and content delivered). Findings derived from the survey data and conference discussion groups will be used, and combined, where possible.

Overall, the **survey findings** suggest that those in receipt of preparation find the experience worthwhile. Therefore, it would be a logical assumption that if the reach was extended to more couples, they would be equally satisfied.

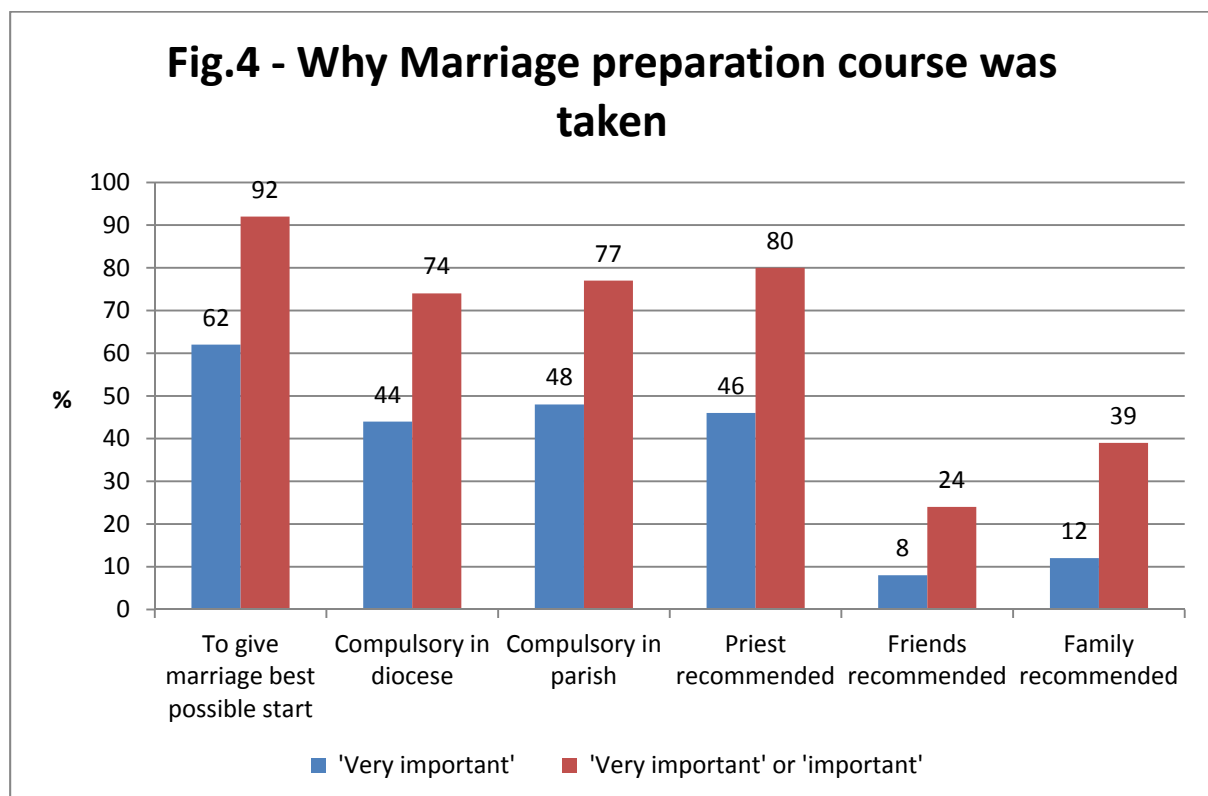
However, prior to detailing the findings there is a cautionary note. There is a reasonable argument to suggest that the couples motivated to complete the survey may well have been the most satisfied ‘customers’. Indeed, perhaps more meaningful data may well have been achieved through surveying people who were approached for marriage preparation but, for one reason or other, decided not to enrol – their reasons could have been areas to address in order to improve uptake. Alongside these points, the limited sample size provides a strong argument that the respondents to this survey cannot be assumed to be representative of the wider numbers completing marriage preparation in the Catholic Church (although the numbers of couples enrolling in marriage preparation in the Catholic Church are not available to the author). Further reservations and suggestions for future research are outlined in Chapter 8 (*Overall recommendations and priorities for future action*).

### **4.2 Reasons for taking the course**

For the majority of couples, a strong motivating factor to take the course was to gain positive outcomes. A headline finding was that 62% rated it ‘very important’ (92% ‘important’ or ‘very important’) to give their marriage the best possible start. These ratings were derived from a four

point scale where responses could be ‘very important’, ‘important’, ‘not important’ or ‘not applicable’ (see Figure 4). As shown in the literature review, these high expectations of the course were associated with course value – see later in this chapter for satisfaction ratings.

This motivation to take the course exceeded other reasons that were rated ‘very important’, including ‘Compulsory in diocese’ (44%), ‘compulsory in parish’ (48%) and ‘Priests recommended’ (46%). The motivations least often rated as ‘very important’ were recommendations from friends or family (8% and 12% respectively).



A further fundamental factor affecting uptake is the ease of finding ‘information about a marriage preparation course and to organise participation’. A notable 68% of couples<sup>11</sup> reported this as easy, although a further 32% reported it either as ‘difficult’ or ‘slightly inconvenient’. Further investigation into this factor, which may be affecting attendance, would be worthwhile. This finding ties in with an area of dissatisfaction in the course – see later in this chapter for satisfaction ratings.

<sup>11</sup> When reporting the survey, a finding is often attributed to a ‘couple’ although the literal translation of this should be read as one member of a couple (assuming that one member of the couple completed the survey). Although 20.9% of respondents reported their partner had also taken the survey, it is assumed this counts as two respondents.

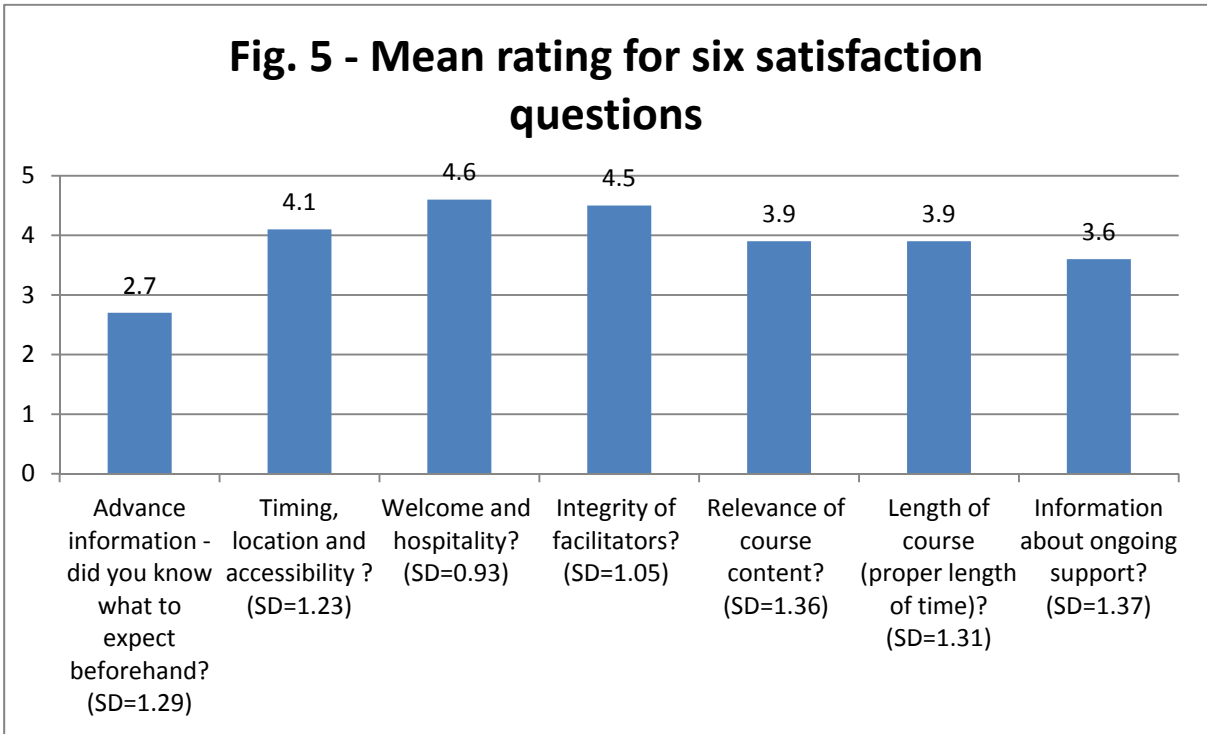
In terms of fees to pay for marriage preparation, they ranged from free of charge (23% of the couples) to more than £100 (9%). The price was recorded in price bands, and hence the average is not possible to calculate, however the modal charge (most commonly reported) was between £30 and £50 (27%). The findings are similar to the providers' answers, with most reporting the price as between £30 and £50 (35%), compared to 25% as free of charge. Although of interest, we are unable to gauge whether price was a deciding factor that influenced attendance (due to the nature of the question as well as the nature of the self-selecting sample of those that had completed the course). Likewise it is not possible to assume this is representative of the costs all couples attending marriage preparation pay.

### **4.3 Satisfaction ratings**

As a headline finding, the experience for the majority of couples was most satisfying. Although noting the self-selecting sample for those completing the survey, it does appear that once people are encouraged to attend, their expectations will be met whole heartedly. This in itself is credit to the providers, delivery styles and content. It also means that the enrolment of more couples to marriage preparation is key to providing the best support possible for their marriage, perhaps more so than modifications to course content or delivery.

To illustrate this satisfaction, survey respondents were asked to rate, on a 5-point scale, their response to seven statements. Ratings were coded as follows: 1: 'Not at all'; 2: 'Not very much'; 3: 'Somewhat'; 4: 'For the most part'; 5: 'Yes'. As all seven questions were positively worded in the same direction, a high sense of agreement or a positive response would be indicated by a higher rating (i.e. a person responding '5' or 'yes' would achieve a higher score than someone responding '1' or 'Not at all'). To summarise the responses, it is possible to present a mean or average rating with higher scores indicating a more positive response (within the range of 1 to 5). These average ratings are shown below (Figure 5):





SD = Standard Deviation from the mean is an indication of the dispersion of the data from the mean whereby a higher SD signifies that more data were further from the mean value provided. Between 107 and 110 people answered these seven questions.

Examining this in more detail, there was particularly high satisfaction with the timing, location and accessibility; welcome and hospitality; and integrity of facilitators (all 4 or more out of 5). A notably lower rating (2.7) was given for the advance information. To be precise, 24% of couples rated themselves as ‘Not at all’ or ‘Not very much’ satisfied as regards the advance information: this is a specific area that, if addressed, could improve the effectiveness of the support. This response ties in with the earlier reported finding that 32% of couples reported that it was either ‘difficult’ or ‘slightly inconvenient’ to ‘find information about a marriage preparation course and to organise participation’. Moreover, this lack of information may impact on the couple’s expectations of the course which, as shown in the literature review, is an influencing factor on the perceived value of the course. In relation, a response from the conference discussion groups noted how this could be addressed, as follows:

*“Consider whether we should send out objectives of the day in advance so that couples know a little of what to expect. And give them the opportunity to say what they expect.”*

There was also one problematic question here, although the high satisfaction rating prevents any real misinterpretation from arising. This is with reference to the length of the course where the majority clearly thought it was 'the proper length of time'. However, for the minority who thought otherwise (17% were 'not at all' or 'not very much' satisfied), it is not clear whether they would have preferred it to be longer or shorter in duration. As course length is of clear interest to policy-makers in this context, an improved question would be recommended.

Combining these seven average scores to produce an overall indicator of satisfaction, the mean satisfaction rating overall was 3.9 out of 5 (SD=.90). This overall rating can be used to show variations across the survey respondents and therefore give us a better understanding of the data. For interest, the following seven factors have been analysed to compare their overall satisfaction rating<sup>12</sup>:

- Marital status (married or not married) – at the time of survey (all courses took place prior to marriage)
- Time of course prior to marriage (Less than 3 months or more than 3 months)
- Catholic-Catholic partnership or other partnership
- Consider becoming a provider or not<sup>13</sup>
- Length of course
- Who course was delivered by<sup>14</sup>.

These comparisons are shown below in Table 1:

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<sup>12</sup> For this type of comparative analysis dichotomous variables are particularly suited (i.e. where there are only two possible responses such as gender). However, as there was little demographic data recorded in the survey, such as age, or gender, the potential for these types of comparisons is rather limited.

<sup>13</sup> As to be shown in the next Chapter 5 – *Recruitment and support of marriage preparation providers*, 38% of couples responded positively about becoming a provider.

<sup>14</sup> Where less than 20 people reported a particular type of provider these were excluded as the sample sizes were deemed too small for comparisons.

**Table 1 – Variation in couple satisfaction ratings of the Marriage Preparation course**

Variable for comparison with overall satisfaction	Mean rating	Difference in mean rating	Independent samples t-test <sup>15</sup>
Married at the time of survey completion	3.6 (SD=1.16)		
Not married at the time of survey completion	4.1 (SD=0.80)	+0.5 <sup>16</sup>	t(103)=2.12, p<0.05
Course < 3 months before marriage	3.7 (SD=1.00)		
Course > 3 months before marriage	4.0 (SD=0.84)	+0.3	t(103)=1.43, p=0.15
Catholic-Catholic partnership	3.8 (SD=0.91)		
Non-Catholic-Catholic partnership	3.9 (SD=0.91)	+0.1	t(103)=0.78, p=0.43
Consider becoming a provider	4.1 (SD=0.75)		
Not considering to become a provider	3.7 (SD=0.96)	-0.4	t(103)=2.03, p<0.05
Length of course – one day	3.9 (SD=0.84)		
Length of course – other	3.8 (SD=0.96)	-0.1	t(93)=-0.14, p=0.88
Delivered by Parish Priest	3.5 (SD 1.18)		t(29.4)=-1.65, p=0.11 <sup>17</sup>
Delivered by Parish Marriage Preparation provider	3.9 (SD=0.87)	+0.4	t(103)=.31, p=0.75
Delivered by Marriage Care centre	3.9 (SD=0.81)	+0.4	t(103)=-.068, p=0.94

The comparison of these average overall satisfaction ratings show minimal variation, with the most noticeable difference between those married and those not yet married ( $p < 0.05$ ) at the time of survey completion. Those not yet married found the course more satisfying. This suggests, for example, that the time-lapse between the programme (prior to marriage) and survey completion (after marriage) may show the diminishing impacts of marriage preparation. In addition, and not surprisingly, those people who were less satisfied with the course were less likely to consider becoming a provider ( $p < 0.05$ ). However, these must be recognised as rather crude comparisons as no other mitigating factors have been taken into account. Many of the variables used for comparison will be detailed in later findings.

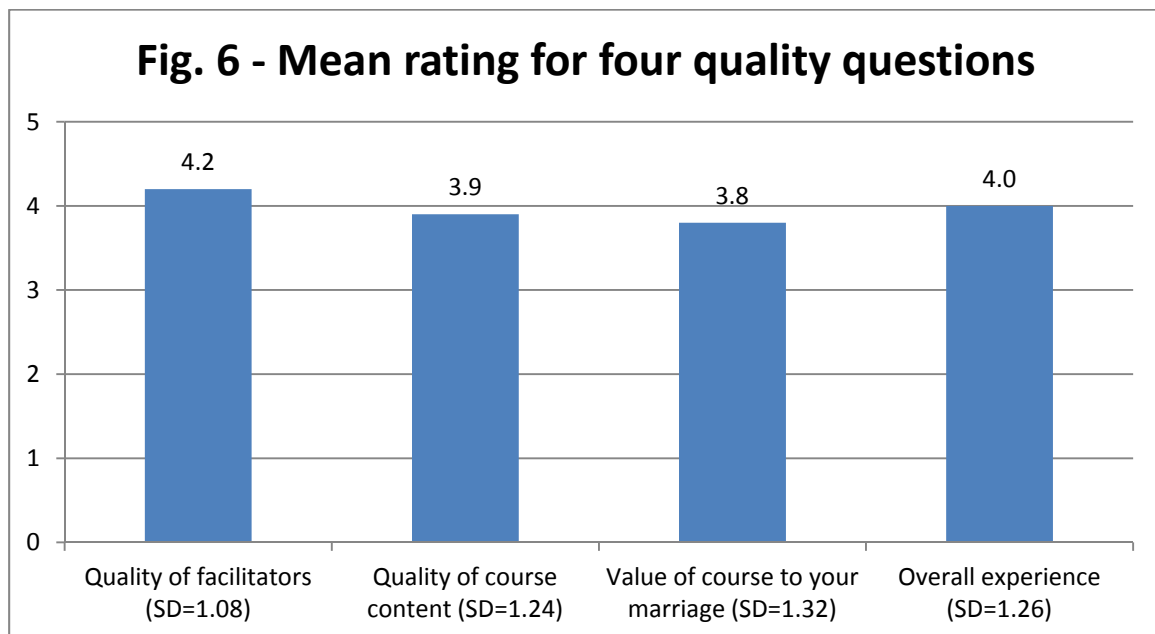
<sup>15</sup> Independent samples t-test can determine the statistical significance of the different means between two groups in the same sample (in this case those who are married and those who are not). A p value of  $< 0.05$  is taken as the cut-off for the results showing a statistically significant difference (whereby there is less than a 5% likelihood that this difference could be created by chance).

<sup>16</sup> The difference is calculated against the first listed response i.e. 'married' in this instance.

<sup>17</sup> The t-tests compare those who were provided by the said provider compared to those who were not, as opposed to a comparison between different providers.

#### 4.4 Quality ratings

There were a further four headline questions indicative of the course value. These were again generated across scale questions ranging from 1 'Poor' to 5 'Excellent'. The average or mean scores are presented below (Figure 6) and further illustrate the overall positive response to the course. As a headline figure, the average rating for the quality of overall experience was 4.0 out of 5.0 (SD=1.26), with 45.9% rating their overall experience as 'excellent':



Given the significance of this quality of 'overall experience' variable, the same comparisons are made to those previously to see if this rating differed in any meaningful way. The results are as follows (Table 2):

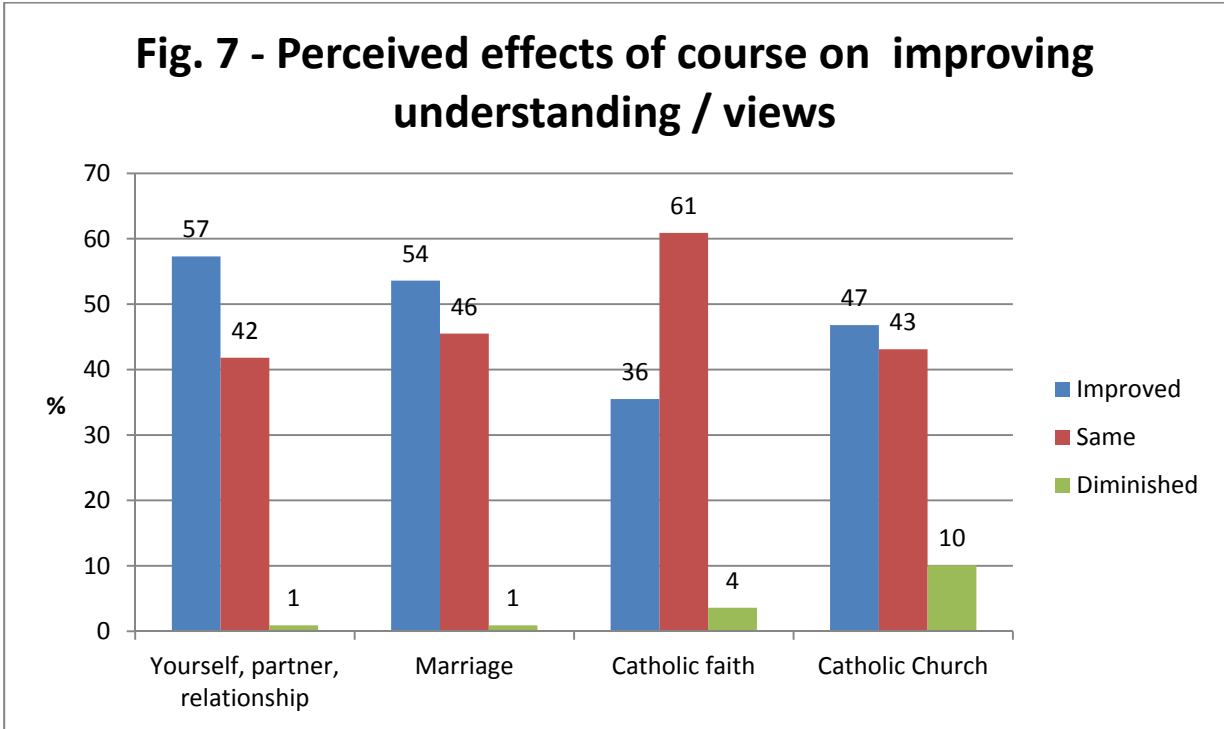
**Table 2 – Variation in overall experience of the Marriage Preparation course**

<b>Variable for comparison with quality of overall experience</b>	<b>Mean rating</b>	<b>Difference in mean rating</b>	<b>Independent samples t-test</b>
Married at the time of survey completion	3.7 (SD=1.43)		
Not married at the time of survey completion	4.1 (SD=1.20)	+0.4	t(107)=1.43, p=0.15
Course < 3 months before marriage	3.6 (SD=1.51)		
Course > 3 months before marriage	4.2 (SD=1.06)	+0.6	t(59.2)=2.41, p=<0.05
Catholic-Catholic partnership	4.1 (SD=1.25)		
Non-Catholic-Catholic partnership	3.9 (SD=1.29)	-0.2	t(107)=-.60, p=0.54
Consider becoming a provider	4.1 (SD=1.34)		
Not considering to become a provider	3.9 (SD=1.22)	-0.2	t(103)=0.47, p=0.64
Length of course – one day	3.9 (SD=1.33)		
Length of course – other	4.0 (SD=1.21)	+0.1	t(97)=0.56, p=0.57
Delivered by Parish Priest	3.6 (SD 1.50)		t(33.2)=-1.59, p=0.12
Delivered by Parish Marriage Preparation provider	4.1 (SD=1.16)	+0.5	t(107)=.82, p=0.41
Delivered by Marriage Care centre	3.9 (SD=1.30)	+0.3	t(107)=-.67, p=0.50

As with the previous satisfaction ratings, the non-married group (at the time of survey completion) reported notably more positive experiences relative to the married group. However, of even greater difference was the higher quality reported by those taking their course more than three months prior to marriage ( $p<0.05$ ). Although again a rather crude interpretation, this finding indicates an optimum time for delivering marriage preparation i.e. leaving at least a three month gap between the course and the wedding day. As for overall quality of the experience, the length of the course made no difference, although a larger sample would allow a range of different lengths to be explored.

#### **4.5 Perceived effects of Marriage Preparation**

These satisfaction and quality questions were closely linked to the perceived effects of marriage preparation, considered in terms of the relationship; marriage; Catholic faith; and Catholic Church (Figure 7):



Although the general interpretation is positive (e.g. 57% perceived that marriage preparation had improved 'Yourself, partner, relationship'), one may also consider that the results are not as positive as expected, with high ratings for aspects remaining 'about the same' (42% to 61% for the four questions). There may be two possible explanations for this. Firstly, for most, there was minimal time between the marriage preparation course and the survey completion, so that the effects of the course may not have yet had time to come to fruition (or even 'put to the test'). For example, we know that the majority of people (74%) completed their marriage preparation course between one and six months before their wedding (Figure 1), and that only 24% were married (see earlier Chapter 3 – *Study context: Profile of survey respondents*). Although a question about how long ago they took their marriage preparation course *prior to survey* would be useful, we can assume from these data that it may have been less than six months ago for the majority. A second explanation could be the 'ceiling effect' (see Chapter 2 – *Study context: Brief review of existing literature*) of general satisfaction in the time leading to marriage. In this sense, one may expect views about the relationship and marriage to be reasonably highly rated anyway, so a rating of 'about the same' could be seen as maintaining a high level of satisfaction. Both explanations suggest that the more accurate effects of marriage preparation may be sourced from a follow-up of couples over a longer time period since their course. This would be extremely useful as we know, generally, that the perceived quality of relationships decline through time and are often accelerated through the

transition to parenthood (Hirschberger et al 2009). Finally, and reflecting the general satisfaction, 77% of people would recommend the course to their friends, although 11% would not.

The open-ended comments recorded in the couple survey generally endorsed the positive reactions above in terms of satisfaction and impact. There were a number of positive comments about the course, with the following examples also drawing reference to the low expectation beforehand (a point linked to poor outcomes noted earlier):

*“My partner & I were extremely sceptical of the course & its content before attendance. We were both really shocked how relevant it was to us & to our marriage. It gave us a greater understanding of the bond of marriage & the strengths & weaknesses of our relationship.”*

*“I was reluctant to attend but I am really glad we did because the day was so informative and enjoyable. I think that all couples should be asked to attend a day like this.”*

Some of these positive comments extended specifically to the providers:

*“Parish priest excellent! Warm, welcoming and great personality!”*

*“The facilitators were excellent.”*

A further appreciation was attached to the elements of Catholicism noted in marriage preparation:

*“The course leaders were very professional but fully approachable & really believed in what they were teaching. Their enthusiasm about our relationship within the Catholic Church was inspiring.”*

*“The whole course was really useful and the facilitators were really good as well. The only thing I would add is to get more guest speakers like the Priest. He gave a wonderful session on the Sacrament.”*

Although in the minority, a number of people were less satisfied. While there was some criticism about the providers, the majority area of dissatisfaction was the limited content attached to the Catholic faith. For example:

*“The course was NOT Catholic. It was a course on conflict resolution and gender differences and a bad one at that.”*

*“I had hoped that the course would focus more on our Catholic faith, and the strength and comfort we would always feel from God.”*

Given this striking difference to the positive responses above, it appears that this could be due to the different approach and experience of the course providers, or indicative of the varied content and ways in which the course is delivered.

#### **4.6 Introducing the ideas to further the recruitment of couples**

To complement these survey findings on satisfaction, quality and effects, the findings from the conference discussion groups also provided some insight into the recruitment of couples into marriage preparation. Although some cross-over with later sections on the *Recruitment and support of marriage preparation providers* (Chapter 5) and the *Existing delivery and content of the marriage preparation programme* (Chapter 6), some of the responses from the conference discussion groups are introduced below.

Given that somewhere in the region of 60%<sup>18</sup> of marriage preparation courses are for a day or less (assuming a ‘series of evenings’ and a weekend constitute more than one day), this was not entirely in tune with the Church’s belief that marriage preparation is “of great importance for the good of the Church<sup>19</sup>” With this in mind, the provision of additional, alternative and ongoing (additional) marriage preparation and making couples aware of this in advance could potentially improve course uptake. Whilst some conference participants accepted this time as a limitation (e.g. *“Can’t do everything”*) roughly equal proportions were more challenging in their viewpoint (e.g. *“Challenge assumptions – sell the idea that it cannot be just a short amount of time. If you learn to drive you don’t expect to do it in a day”*).

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<sup>18</sup> Answered in both the couple survey (55%) and provider survey (53%) and derived from all responses apart from ‘other’ (including ‘day’, ‘half day’). However, when the providers were specifically asked the number of hours per couple, 78% reported eight hours or less.

<sup>19</sup> Pontifical Council for the Family (1996) *Preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage*. Oxford: Family Publications. #1



Note that further findings on recruiting couples and course content are outlined in Chapter 7 – *Policy and Guidelines for the future provision of Marriage Preparation (including delivery and content)* and Chapter 8 – *Overall recommendations and priorities for future action*.

#### **Summary points from Chapter 4 – Recruiting couples and their views of Marriage Preparation**

- ✓ Overall, the survey findings suggest that those in receipt of marriage preparation find the experience worthwhile. This means that the enrolment of more couples for marriage preparation is key to providing the best support possible, arguably more so than modifications to course content or delivery.
- ✓ These findings suggest that if the reach was extended to more couples, they would be equally satisfied. Indeed, one obvious means of enhancing the effectiveness of marriage preparation is to increase the numbers of couples in receipt of the offer.
- ✓ However, a point of caution about the survey data is required. It may be the case that the couples motivated to complete the survey may well have been the most satisfied ‘customers’. Moreover, the limited sample size (n=116) indicates that the respondents to this survey cannot be assumed to be representative of the wider numbers completing marriage preparation in the Catholic Church.
- ✓ Considering the most fundamental of reasons for taking the preparation course, it was clear that a strong motivating factor was to gain positive outcomes. As shown in the literature review, these high expectations of the course were associated with high course value.
- ✓ Examining the course value in more detail, there was a particularly high satisfaction with the timing, location and accessibility; welcome and hospitality; and integrity of facilitators (all scoring 4 or more out of a possible 5 based on a 5-point likert scale of ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’). Combining these scores, the mean satisfaction rating overall was 3.9 out of 5 (SD=.90).
- ✓ Interestingly, a notably lower rating (2.7) was given for the advance information about what to expect beforehand. To be precise, 24% of couples rated themselves as ‘Not at all’ or ‘Not very much’ satisfied as regards the advance information. This lack of information may impact on the

couple's expectations of the course which, as shown in the literature review, is an influencing factor on its perceived value. In relation to this, 32% of couples reported it either 'difficult' or 'slightly inconvenient' to 'find information about a marriage preparation course and to organise participation'. It would be recommended to explore this latter finding further, which may be affecting attendance.

- ✓ The overall satisfaction score was compared across several groups. The most noticeable difference in satisfaction was seen between those married and those not yet married (at the time of survey) ( $p < 0.05$ ). These results suggest that the delay in completing the course for those married at the time of survey may indicate the diminishing impacts of marriage preparation.
- ✓ Unsurprisingly, those people who were less satisfied with the course were less likely to consider becoming a provider ( $P < 0.05$ ).
- ✓ Four further headline questions indicated course value: Quality of facilitators; quality of course content; value of course to marriage; and overall experience. All were rated highly (between 3.8 and 4.2 out of 5). The quality of the overall experience was 4.0 out of 5.0 ( $SD = 1.26$ ), with 45.9% rating their overall experience as 'excellent'.
- ✓ As with the previous satisfaction ratings, there were some notable variations in the overall quality of experience, with a more positive experience reported by the non-married group relative to those married. However, of even greater difference was the higher rating of quality reported by those taking their course more than three months prior to marriage ( $p < 0.05$ ).
- ✓ The perceived effects of the course on improving understanding / views were generally positive (e.g. 57% perceived that marriage preparation had improved 'Yourself, partner, relationship'). However, the results may not have been as positive as expected given the expected high levels of satisfaction prior to marriage.
- ✓ Reflecting the general satisfaction, 77% of people would recommend the course to their friends, although 11% would not.

- ✓ The open ended comments endorsed these survey findings, for example: *“I was reluctant to attend but I am really glad we did because the day was so informative and enjoyable. I think that all couples should be asked to attend a day like this.”*
  
- ✓ Comments highlighted the positive role of the providers, and the elements of Catholicism included in the marriage preparation. A minority of people, however, were less satisfied about the course not including sufficient attention to being a Catholic couple. Given this striking difference to the majority of the positive responses above, it appears that this could be due to the different approach and experience of the course providers, or indicate the varied content and ways in which the course is delivered.

## Chapter 5 – Recruitment and support of Marriage Preparation providers

In addition to the need to recruit more *couples* into marriage preparation, a fundamental factor affecting the effectiveness of the course can be gleaned from the recruitment of *providers*. The perspectives from the self-selected sample of couples show a clear satisfaction with the marriage preparation course (perhaps one exception being knowing what to expect beforehand). Therefore, recruiting high quality providers is essential to the continued success of marriage preparation. This section will cover three main areas as follows:

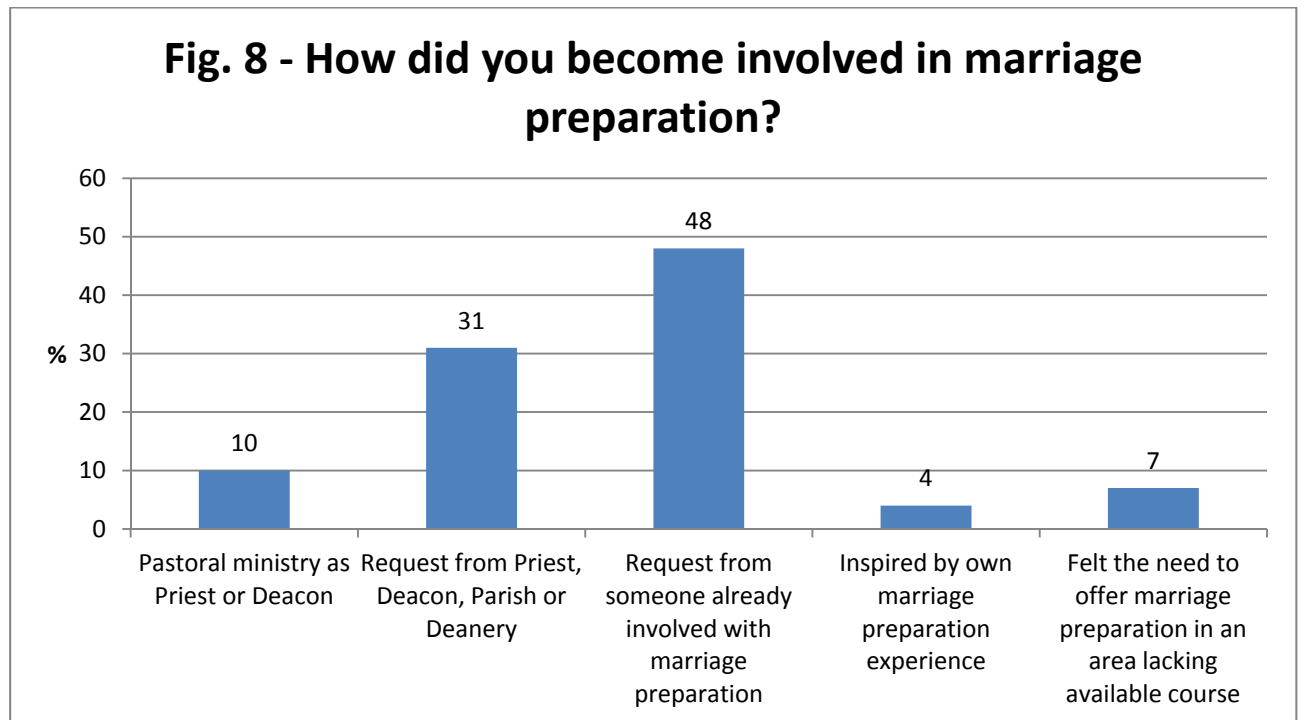
- Recruitment of providers;
- Training and continuing professional development;
- Support and networking.

### 5.1 Recruitment of providers

The recruitment of new providers is a critical aspect of marriage preparation for the Catholic Church and is reflected in the data concerning this subject. Although this is an issue for all facilitator-led programmes, the concern is particularly pertinent in this context given the length of service reported in the provider survey. Although there was no indication of the provider's age in the survey (an important omission), the fact that over one-half (51%) of those surveyed had been running marriage preparation for over seven years *suggests* the need to consider future recruits (Figure 2). It also signifies that any attempts to recruit new providers may not be operating as effectively as required, given that only 22% of providers have been practicing for three years or less. This clearly implicates the high-level policy of the Church to make marriage preparation more available (see Chapter 7 – *Policy and Guidelines for the future provision of Marriage Preparation [including delivery and content]*). Nonetheless, it must also be acknowledged that an experienced group of marriage preparation providers have been delivering courses that are extremely well received (according to the couple survey), thus questioning these concerns towards recruitment.

In considering ways to boost recruitment, the findings from the provider survey are most illuminating as they indicate their motivations for involvement. The predominant reasons reported by the providers were from an overt request from 'someone already involved with marriage preparation' (48%) or from a request either from a Priest, Deacon, Parish or Deanery (31%). The former suggests that 'word of mouth' may be influential but, at the same time, this route is often

more ad hoc and relies on the providers own judgement about the suitability of a potential provider. The latter mentioned recommendation from clergy are important, although it is not clear whether these requests are routinely issued (if they were, then potentially more people could be attracted to prepare in this way). Figure 8 depicts these responses (from those 172 providers that provided an answer):



The fact that 79% of providers had responded to a request from another provider or Parish Priest is in tune with the couples who were surveyed. There was a solitary question that asked whether the couples would consider training to become a provider, whereby 42 people or 38% responded positively. This willingness to become a provider obviously mirrors the high proportion of already trained providers that became involved in this way. Overall, it is clear that direct recommendation, especially from ‘someone already involved’ in the programme, is the most common means of recruitment, with the overall satisfaction of the preparation extending beyond the individual’s circumstance to a willingness to share their own positive experience with others. However, this may not be the most strategic means of recruitment should there be, for example, a substantial increase in demand for courses.

Further exploration into the profiles of the newer recruits compared to those operating for a longer period helps to reveal more about the routes of recruitment. The data were segregated into those

who had been preparing couples for three years or less (22% of providers) compared to those for over seven years (51%). Differences were seen according to how the providers became involved, with a greater proportion of new providers reporting a direct request or recommendation from ‘someone already involved’ in the programme (53% of those preparing for three years or less reported this compared to 46% of those preparing for over seven years<sup>20</sup>).

The open-ended comments in the provider survey also reflected these findings around direct recommendation and willingness to share own experiences, for example:

*“20 years ago a Priest asked me to give a 'Sex Talk ' for engaged couples. This developed into the course that xxxx and I now give.”*

*“Having been married for 28 years, when approached to help in the preparation of couples for marriage it was a small gesture of giving something back to society in gratitude for the happiness that marriage and family life have brought me. If my experience of marriage and family can be passed on in some small way to new couples starting out together, then I feel I have contributed to their stability which in turn contributes to the stability of society.”*

As a final note to this sub-section, it appears that direct recommendation is the most commonly used route to recruit providers. While this might be effective to some degree, it is evident that a more strategic, and less ad hoc approach may be required to boost the number of new providers. This has implications for high-level policy (see Chapter 7 – *Policy and Guidelines for the future provision of Marriage Preparation [including delivery and content]*), in terms of designated roles for recruitment staff and raising people’s awareness of the need to recruit, and the provision of the necessary training and support which will be outlined next.

## **5.2 Training and continuing professional development**

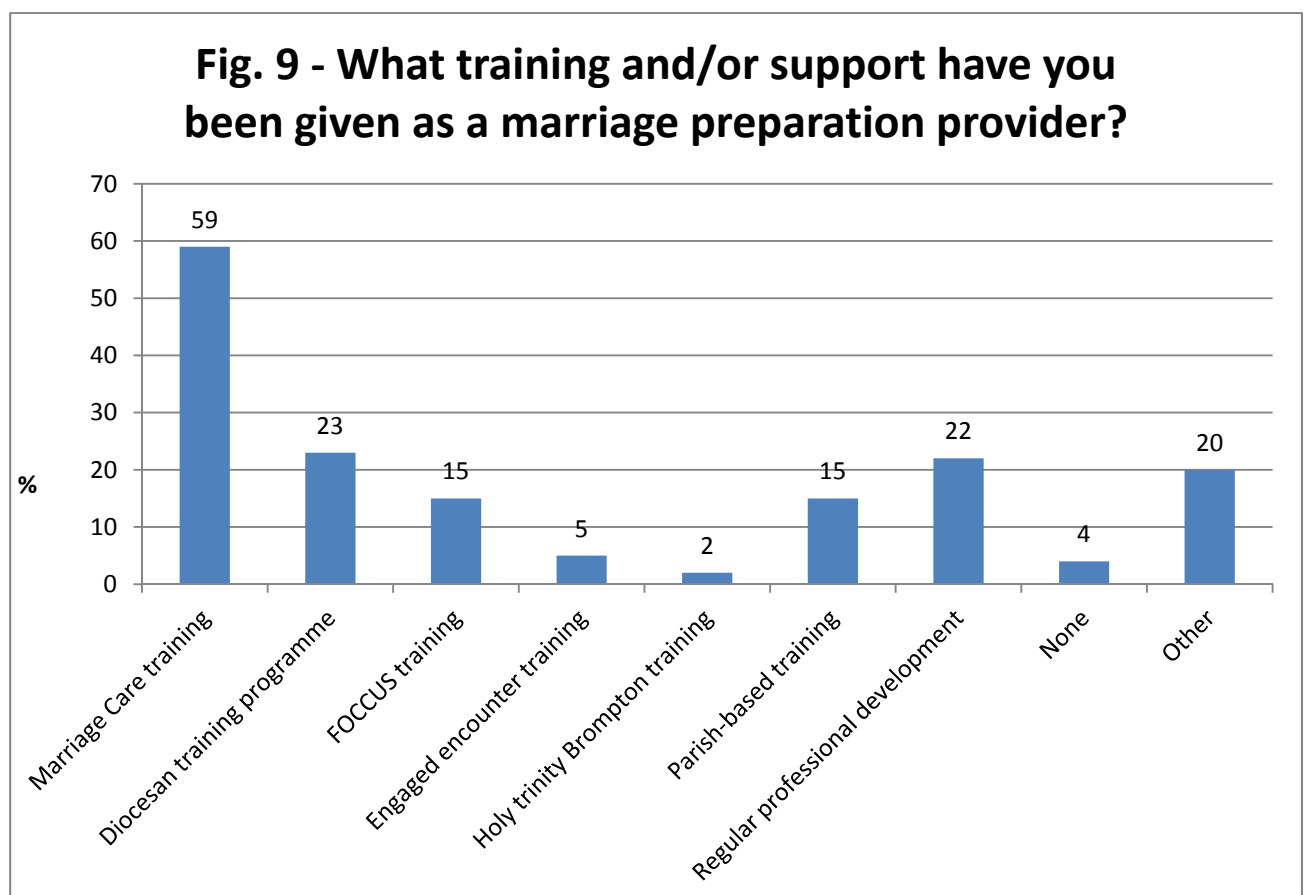
The emphasis until this point has been on recruiting new providers, with little reference to establishing or maintaining the quality of this provision. Whilst there are no data on provider retention, it is prudent to ensure all providers receive the necessary training and support to maintain the positive reception to the marriage preparation courses. This is essential, because should the quality or satisfaction of the courses drop, then the interest of couples to volunteer as providers may

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<sup>20</sup> From all those that gave an answer i.e. excludes ‘other’ and ‘none’.

well dwindle too. Likewise, given that 48% of providers reported that they were recruited through the request of an existing provider (Figure 8), feeling assured that ongoing training and adequate support is available may well improve the proportion of couples becoming involved in this manner.

The provider survey asked a question about the type of training they had received. As people could have ticked more than one type of training (as was the case for 45% of providers), the percentages exceed 100%. The responses (Figure 9) show that most people had been trained through Marriage Care (59%), some 36 percentage point difference to the other options. From personal communication with the Catholic Bishops' Committee for Marriage and Family Life, there was an indication that the most credible training programmes were those from Marriage Care, Diocesan Training programme (ticked by 23%) and FOCCUS (15%). As Figure 9 shows, a reasonable proportion of providers had been trained in these latter two mentioned programmes. Worryingly, a small but significant group (4%) reported no training at all and only 22% had been in receipt of 'regular professional development'.



Although the majority were trained by Marriage Care, a fair proportion had received other additional training. The average number of different types of training opportunities taken up was 1.6 for the entire sample, and 1.7 for those trained by Marriage Care.

Further comparisons in training and support can be made according to length of service. In comparison to longer serving providers, a larger proportion of newer providers reported having undergone training from Marriage Care (65% for those providing for three years or less compared to 52% providing for over seven years), and less through FOCCUS (2% newer providers; 21% longer serving providers), and the Diocesan training programme (14% newer providers; 29% longer serving providers). There were no meaningful differences across the other types of training with relatively even proportions of the newer and longer serving providers reporting no training at all (7% and 4% respectively). It should, however, be emphasised that these are inferences drawn from a length of service question, and more detail on the provider's age or a wider range of service bands (up to, for example, 20 years) would provide a greater insight into any impending retirements from service and the need for new recruits. Note that for those (51%) providing for more than seven years, they had also taken an average of 1.7 different types of training programmes suggested they had kept themselves relatively well trained (compared to those providing for less than one year who, as expected, had taken an average of only 1.2 different programmes).

The conference discussions also revealed that Marriage Care have recruited more volunteers over recent years (compared to those operating over a longer period). The dominance of Marriage Care training implies they may have important learning to share about recruiting providers for marriage preparation and it is recommended that steps are taken to share their experiences. Similarly, the open-ended comments from the provider survey also illustrate the overall importance of Marriage Care, for example:

*"Worked for marriage care as a counsellor".*

*"As part of my work with Marriage Care".*

The open-ended comments from the provider survey also showed reference to further training. The comments were broadly in three areas, namely their 'own' training, training through their job-role, and reference to specific training events connected to the Church, for example (respectively):



*“Our own research”.*

*“Some of my work-related professional development has been helpful for organisation and presentation of courses”.*

*“In-House training within the Oxford Marriage Preparation Team. Peer review of presentations each year. Ongoing training and sharing of experience from each Day at regular Team Meetings”.*

The conference discussion groups and evaluation forms provided further comments about the overall necessity for training and recognition of its importance. The overall consensus was recognising the importance of ongoing CPD. Responses included:

*“Yes! – Continued professional development essential.”*

*“CPD to be at the centre of any organisations commitment to their employees/ volunteers. Stats should be maintained nationally.”*

More detailed responses referred to specific training needs, for example:

*“Further training (on-going) on sexuality, spirituality, sacrament, theology, canon law.”*

*“Training & development – theology /spirituality of marriage; understanding legal/canonical and procedural issues.”*

Specific resources were also cited as a means of providing further support, for example:

*“Everybody should know resources, chatroom couples - [www.thecoupleconnection.net](http://www.thecoupleconnection.net).”*

*“A national newsletter on marriage prep from all organisations (activities, initiatives etc).”*

*“FAQ service?”*

*“Updating materials – DVD, appropriate booklets.”*

There is some additional detail on training and support provided in Chapter 7 – *Policy and Guidelines for the future provision of Marriage Preparation (including delivery and content)*.

### **5.3 Support and networking**

While initial and regular training is seen as essential, an equally important area raised by the providers was the appreciation of the ongoing support and networking opportunities. Although opinions about training were included in the provider survey, the issue of continuing support and networking with additional providers was omitted. However, the importance of this aspect was raised in the conference discussions and more so in the conference evaluation forms. From the conference discussions, mentoring and supervision were viewed as being an integral component to this support and networking. For example:

*“Supervision: someone to talk things through esp after ‘difficult’ groups eg long experienced facilitators from other centres/backgrounds.”*

*“Network of providers is useful – perhaps online.”*

Comments from the evaluation form also showed the value of this support. By the very nature of these recommendations it is significant that a proportion of providers preferred to have more support. Comments about the worthwhile nature of this networking were numerous, for example:

*“An annual event such as this [conference] is great because it enables providers across the country to get together and exchange views and ideas.”*

*“I would like to see more of similar events [conferences] with more opportunity to interact with different providers.”*

These comments also introduce suggestions for increasing the support networks. From the conference discussion groups, and in addition to the online and other resources noted above, the main ways of improving the support networks fell into two clear groups as follows:

1. Mentoring and supervision – having peers to provide support, offer advice, as well as access to a national resource of expertise.

2. Events and conferences (including retreats) – having ‘local’ and more frequent events similar to the national event providing opportunities to share ideas, update on relationship research, and resources. Comments included:

*“Events like this! Updating: best practice; ideas from other organisations/areas; update with legal/canonical developments; trained counsellors e.g. help understand potential problems.”*

*“Sharing information with other marriage preparation providers on days like today.”*

The evaluation forms also demonstrated the key role that providers play in marriage preparation. This was evident through the recommendation to *“nurture those who provide marriage preparation.”* However, it was also evident that, although some providers were receiving ongoing support, this was not extended to all. To improve on the inconsistent support, to make it more widely available, the methods described above need to be taken into account. This comment from the evaluation forms outlines a preference for a ‘national network’:

*“There seemed to be various providers who don’t have a support network. Those in larger organizations have the luxury of continued professional development programmes and a well established support network. It would be really good if some sort of national support network could be established for those who are outside of the larger organizations.”*

The support networks are not only seen as of value to the providers, but can also tie in with events to initiate new policy initiatives. So although the national conference was useful in networking and support, it also provided an arena to discuss and implement higher-level policy issues, especially in ways to drive up the provision of marriage preparation (see Chapter 6 – *The existing delivery and content of the Marriage Preparation programme*). There was a sense that policy decisions and plans for the future could only really be initiated when all key players were consulted, beyond fellow providers, for example (also see Chapter 7 – *Policy and Guidelines for the future provision of Marriage Preparation [including delivery and content]* for further suggestions on provider recruitment):

*“Continue the process begun by bringing the Priests, Bishops, and providers together annually? A definite plan – concrete outcomes.”*

The support networks of providers also gave added-value to the couples in receipt of the course. These networks were seen as a means of tailoring the course to the needs of the couple and, ultimately, providing the best support possible for their marriage. Sharing information between providers would be a necessary prerequisite for tailored training:

*“Good for all providers to have more information about each other. To enable a better fit of couple’s requirements.”*

*“For Parish Priests to have more information about various organisations to be able to channel couples to ‘appropriate’ preparation.”*

Note also how the open-ended comments from the couple survey also mentioned the importance of tailored provision:

*“To have couples aged in their early twenties, just beginning their lives, alongside a couple in their early fifties who have experienced a lot of life as carers, widow and widower, is not suitable for this particular course. Some couples are already living with each other, some were not, some even had a family already. The couples should be interviewed to determine their background well in advance of the course which should then be tailored to their circumstances.”*

*“We are a couple who have been married before and widowed and found the course entirely inappropriate - no allowance was made that we are a mature couple who have known each other for decades.”*

### **Summary points from Chapter 5 – Recruitment and support of Marriage Preparation providers**

- ✓ Sustaining high quality providers is essential to the success of marriage preparation. Although there was no indication of the provider’s age in the survey (an important omission), the fact that over one-half (51%) of those surveyed had been running marriage preparation for over seven years *suggests* the need to consider future recruits. This compares to 22% of providers practicing for three years or less.
- ✓ However, this length of practice question does not necessarily indicate any impending retirement from providing courses – a question on the provider’s age or a question with a wider

range of length of service bands (beyond seven years or more) may have been a more accurate indication.

- ✓ Is the concern over the recruitment of new providers warranted? Note that an experienced group of marriage preparation providers have, based on the couple experience, been delivering courses that are extremely well received. Moreover, those providers who are more experienced have maintained their training, with those practicing for more than seven years taking on average of 1.7 different types of training programmes on marriage preparation (more so, as expected than the newer recruits). It is not possible from the data to compare couple course satisfaction with providers' length of service (as they were recorded in separate surveys).
- ✓ Fresh attempts to recruit new providers may not be operating as effectively as required, given that only 22% of providers have been practicing for three years or less. This implicates the high-level policy of the Church to make marriage preparation more available.
- ✓ Nearly one-half (48%) of all providers were most often recruited from a request from 'someone already involved with marriage preparation'. Note that 38% of couples surveyed would consider training to become a course provider. The overall satisfaction of the preparation extended beyond the individual's circumstance to a willingness to share their own positive experience with others.
- ✓ This suggests that 'word of mouth' or a direct recommendation may be an influential means of recruitment but, at the same time, this route is often more ad hoc and relies on the providers own judgement about the suitability of a potential provider. This may not be the most strategic means of recruitment should there be, for example, a substantial increase in demand for courses.
- ✓ Newer providers, compared to those serving for longer, were more likely to become involved through a direct recommendation from a provider.
- ✓ Although the couples were generally satisfied with their preparation, supporting providers in their role is equally important, as provider satisfaction may ultimately impact on couple experience. It is prudent to ensure all providers receive the necessary training and support to continue the positive reception to the marriage preparation courses.

- ✓ Most people had been trained through Marriage Care (59%), some 36 percentage point difference to the other options. Worryingly, however, a small but significant group (4%) reported no training at all and only 22% had been in receipt of 'regular professional development'.
- ✓ Although the majority were trained by Marriage Care, a fair proportion had received additional training. The average number of different types of training courses taken was 1.6 for the entire sample, and 1.7 for those trained by Marriage Care. The overall consensus was recognising the necessity for ongoing CPD.
- ✓ The newer providers reported more training from Marriage Care (65% for those providing for three years or less compared to 52% providing for over seven years), and less through FOCCUS (2% newer providers compared to 21% longer serving providers), and the Diocesan training programme (14% newer providers compared to 29% longer serving providers).
- ✓ The dominance of Marriage Care training implies they may have important learning to share about recruiting providers for marriage preparation and it is recommended that steps are taken to share their experiences.
- ✓ From the conference discussion groups, mentoring and supervision were viewed as being an integral component of support and networking.
- ✓ It is also significant that a proportion of providers preferred to have more support.
- ✓ Suggestions to increase the 'patchy' support were innovative online resources; mentoring and supervision (peer support); events and conferences (national conferences, retreats, etc.); and the establishment of a national network of providers. The latter was also seen as an important prerequisite in delivering courses tailored to the needs of the couple.

## **Chapter 6 – Existing delivery and content of the Marriage Preparation programme**

This chapter details the delivery and content of *existing* marriage preparation courses. This delivery and content style is one, as shown earlier, that is almost universally positively received by couples. Suggestions for *future* delivery and content will be outlined in Chapter 7.

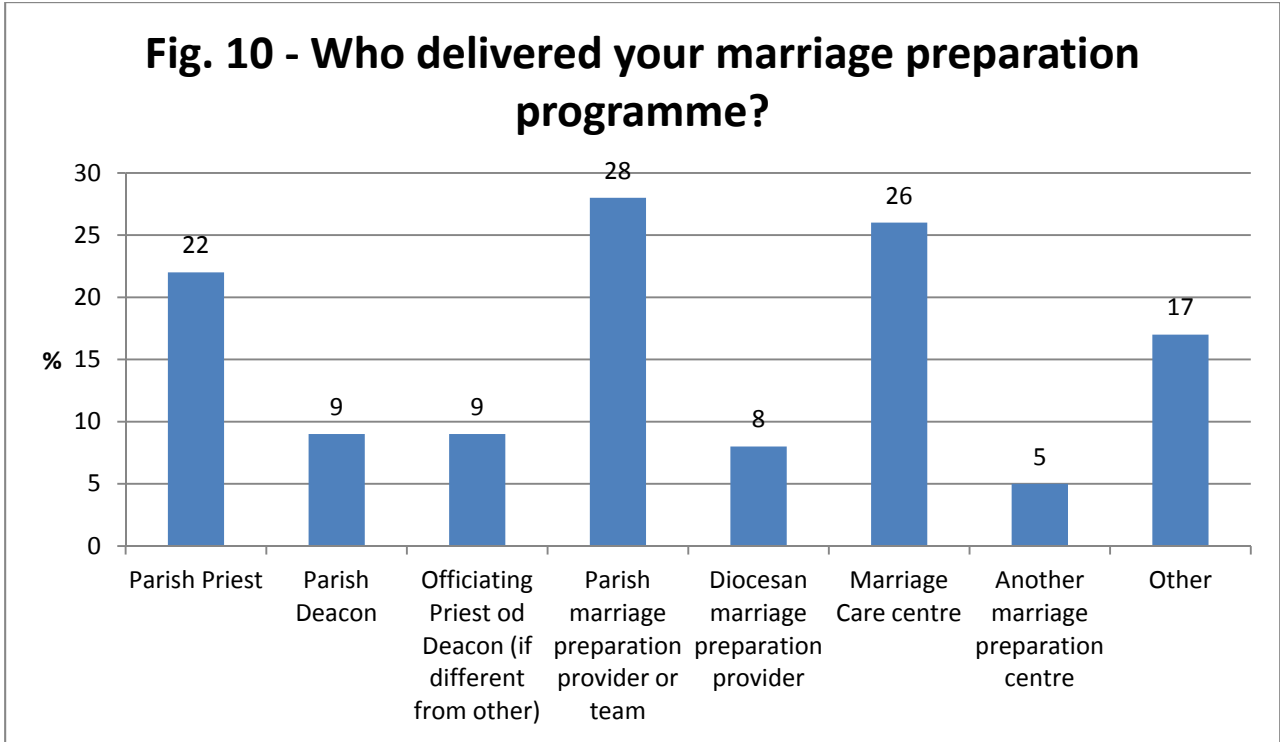
### **6.1 Delivery**

Data are provided on three aspects of the existing delivery of marriage preparation : type of provider delivering the course; the length of the course; and the number of courses delivered (per provider and seasonal fluctuations). Each will be outlined in turn.

#### **a) Type of provider delivering the course**

A wide variety of professionals delivered marriage preparation courses, as shown in Figure 10. The three leading providers reported by couples were Parish Marriage Preparation provider (28% of those couples surveyed reported this as their provider), Marriage Care centre (26%) and Parish Priests (22%). Note that the percentages do not add up to 100% in Figure 10 as it was possible for a person to tick more than one option. In relation, a team approach of delivery was preferred by couples - see Chapter 2 – *Study context: Brief review of existing literature*).

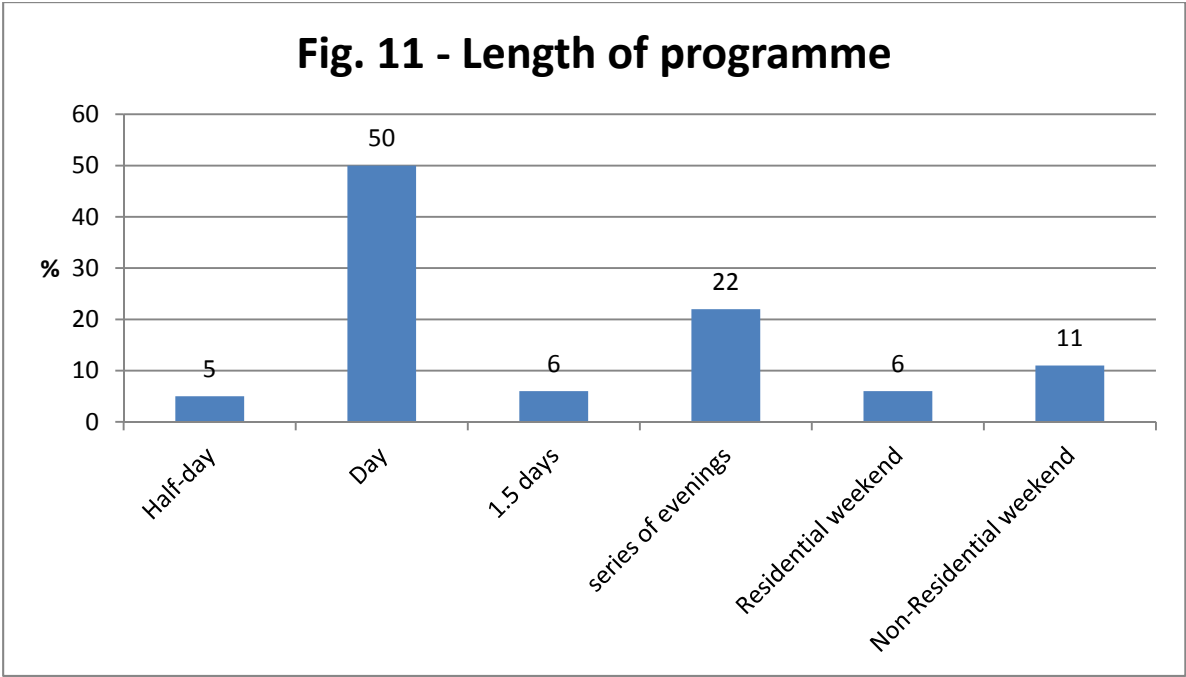
It is likely that the number of those prepared at a Marriage Care centre has increased in recent years. Note the earlier finding (Chapter 5 – *Recruitment and support of Marriage Preparation providers*) that the newer providers reported more training from Marriage Care (65% for those providing three years or less compared to 52% providing for over seven years).



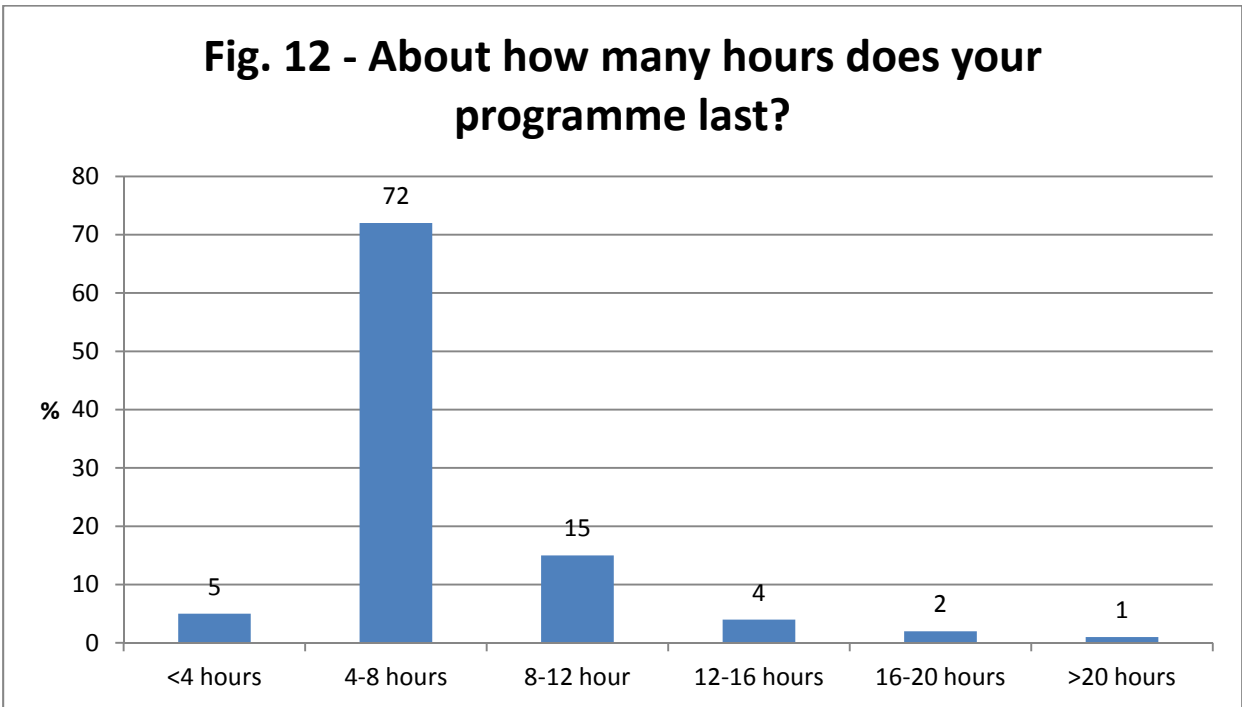
**b) The length of the course**

Questions about the length of the course were asked in both the couple and provider surveys. Given that providers may offer marriage preparation courses of different durations (see later findings in this section about number of courses delivered per year by providers), it is felt that the couple survey (who have attended one such course) may produce a more accurate insight. Figure 11 shows the variation in course length, and the most striking observation is that 55% of couples reported their course as one day or less (assuming that weekends and evenings amounted to more than one day).





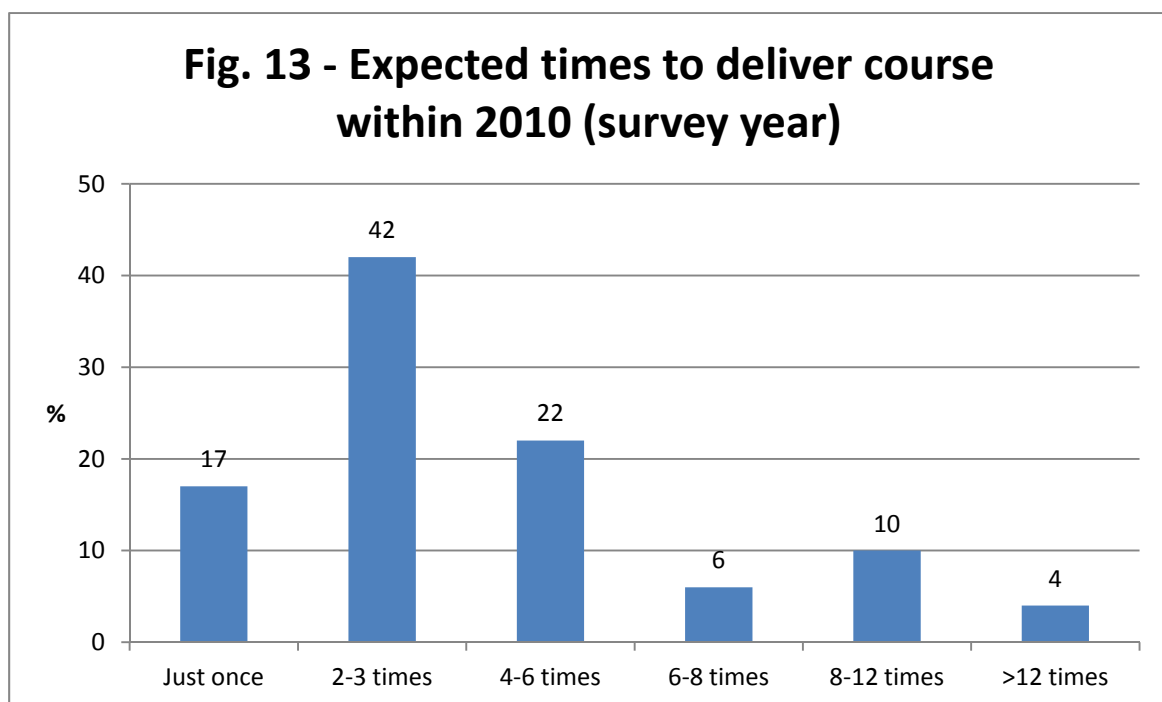
Nonetheless, where data are available from two sources, it is prudent to present the provider findings which, on the whole, reflect the condensed nature of the course (Figure 12). The proportion of providers who reported their courses as eight hours or less was 78% (when rounded up), and notably greater than the equivalent figure from the couple survey (with eight hours assumed to equate to one day). However, an earlier question on the provider survey showed that 53% reported they delivered courses for a day or less (which is closer to the finding from the couple survey).



In looking at the providers' open ended responses to 'other' for course length, the responses were most varied indicating, as shown in the figures above, that there is no standardised length of delivery although the majority are usually around one day.

**c) Number of courses delivered**

The number of courses expected to be delivered during 2010 (assumed to be the entire year of 2010) varied from one to over 12 (Figure 13). The largest proportion was the 42% who expected to deliver courses on either two or three occasions. In total, 81% expected to deliver between one and six courses in 2010. This varied delivery supports the point that the couples' response for course length may be more accurate than the providers, based on the assumption that those who delivered a number of courses may vary them in duration. Note as in some earlier charts that the response options are not mutually exclusive.



An interesting comparison can be made between the number of courses delivered and how long the providers had been practicing. The following table (Table 3) shows that the longer serving providers tended to deliver more courses per year (perhaps unsurprisingly) than those practicing for less than one year. For example, 26% of the longer serving providers delivered over six courses per year compared to 6% of those practicing for less than a year. These results illustrate how recruiting new

providers will not necessarily mean an immediate increase in the number of courses but it will take time for them to deliver more courses.

**Table 3 – Number of courses delivered by length of service**

<b>Number of course delivered per year<sup>21</sup></b>	<b>Practiced more than seven years</b>	<b>Practiced less than one year</b>
One	23%	29%
2-3 times	37%	24%
4-6 times	14%	41%
6-8 times	7%	0%
8-12 times	13%	0%
12 times or more	6%	6%

The providers also shared data on the busiest months for marriage preparation (Figure 14). Given that providers often delivered more than one course, they were able to tick several months which they considered as the ‘busiest’ (hence the figures do not comprise 100%). The busiest months are within the first part of the year, with a further, less substantial peak, in Autumn. The busiest month was March (55% of providers ticked this), followed closely by April (41%), February (40%), and May (40%). As expected this is in contrast to the busiest months for marriage. As shown in Chapter 3 – *Study context: Profile of survey respondents*, 40% of marriages occurred during August and September. This also reflects the average time the course was taken prior to marriage. Figure 1 in Chapter 3 showed that 74% completed their marriage preparation course between one and six months before their wedding – 32% between one and three months, and 42% between three and six months).

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<sup>21</sup> For Figure 14 and Table 3, note that the response options were not mutually exclusive which is an error by the survey designers.

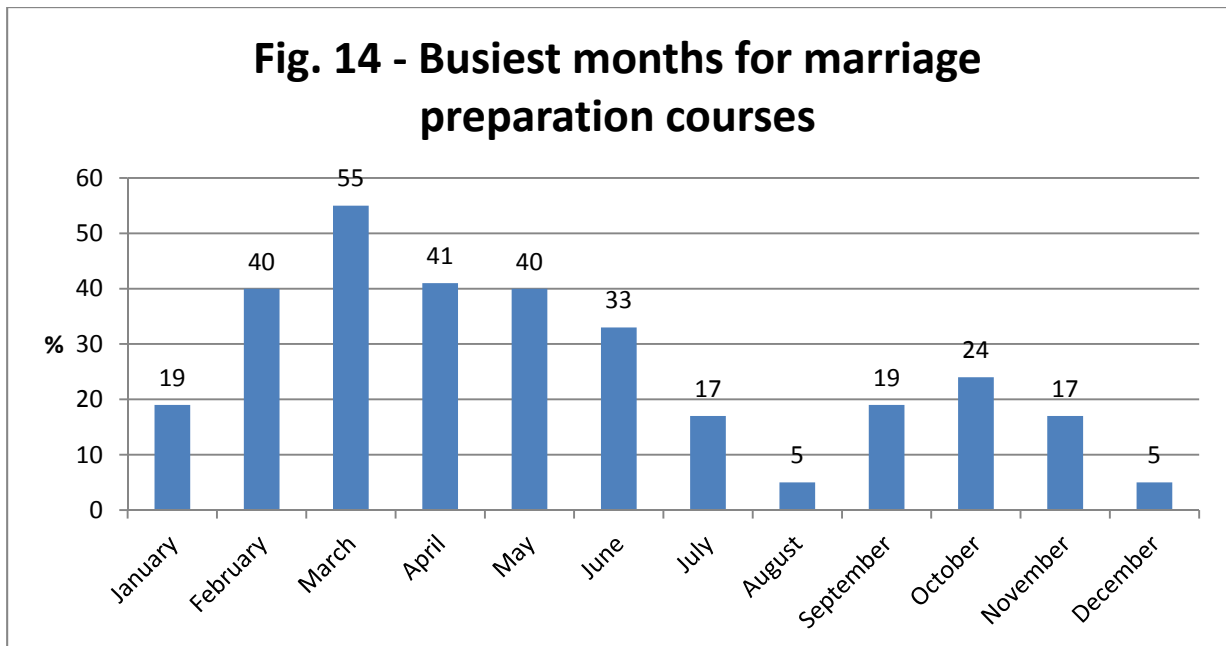


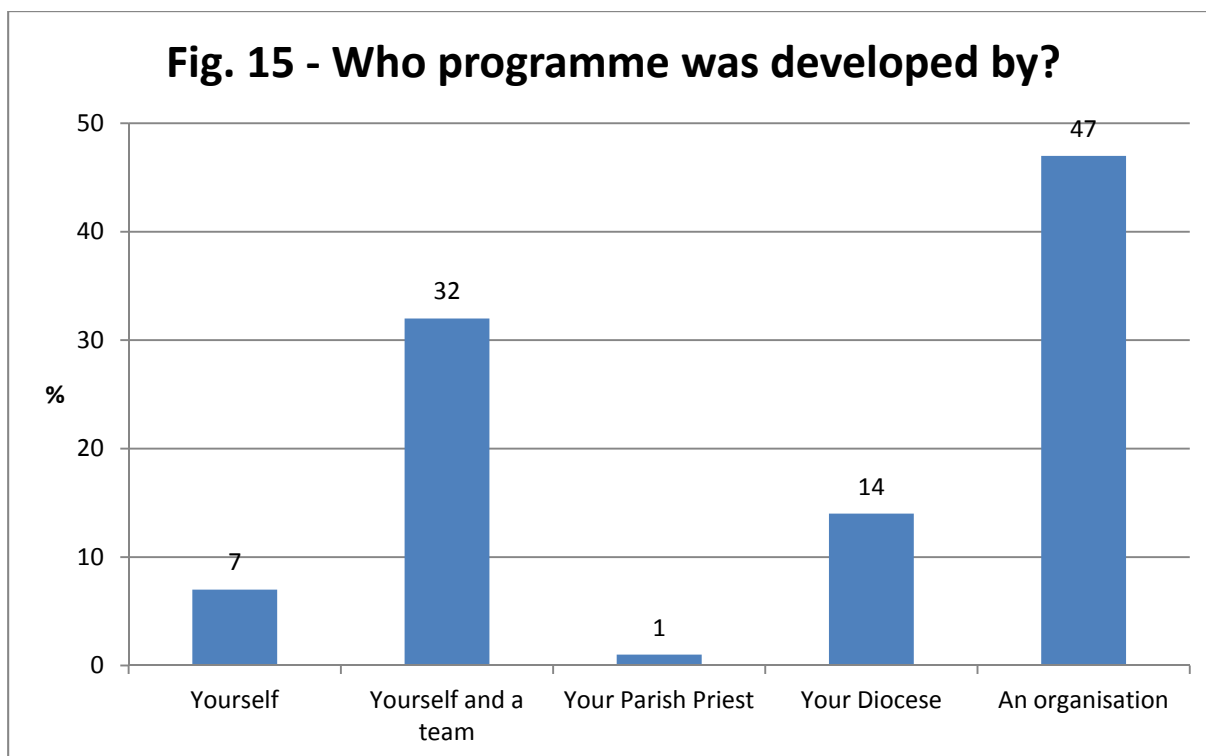
Figure 14 also raises an issue over the seasonal provision of marriage preparation. With relatively few courses occurring during the summer months, there is clearly greater demand at the start and towards the end of the year. This increases the need for more providers at certain times than others and complicates the need for provision compared to the courses being spread more evenly throughout the year.

## 6.2 Content

In this sub-section the origins of the course will be outlined, followed by specific content, and concluded by providers' views on how they saw their role of marriage preparation within the broader life and mission of the Church.

### a) Origins of the course

From the providers who answered this question in the survey, nearly one-half (47%) stated that the course was developed through 'an organisation' as opposed to them self, them self in a team, their Parish Priest, or Diocese (Figure 15):



A further question clarified that, of the organisations developing the course, Marriage Care was by far the most represented (94%). In descending order, additional organisations were Engaged Encounter (3%), Holy Trinity Brompton (2%), and Churches Together (1%). These mirror findings outlined earlier showing the predominance of Marriage Care (Figure 9, Chapter 5, shows that 59% of providers had been trained by Marriage Care, and Figure 10, this chapter, shows that 26% of couples had received a course at a Marriage Care centre). Open-ended comments supported the dominance of Marriage Care in developing the programme, although there was some mention of a Diocesan programme, Prepare/Enrich, and Engaged Encounter.

### **b) Specific course content**

Although the *proposed* core curriculum of content will be discussed in the next Chapter (Chapter 7 – *Policy and Guidelines for the future provision of Marriage Preparation [including delivery and content]*), the survey asked providers about the extent to which they followed the draft core curriculum tabled in 2009. Table 4 illustrates the main topics included in their programmes<sup>22</sup>. The table shows the content provided in rank order, either ‘with a strong emphasis’ or ‘with a moderate emphasis’.

<sup>22</sup> Not clear whether a topic indicated as a ‘yes, with a strong or moderate emphasis’ was included in *all* or the majority of programmes delivered by a particular provider.

**Table 4 – Topics discussed during Marriage Preparation (provider survey)**

<b>Topic discussed</b>	<b>Yes in total %<sup>23</sup></b>	<b>Yes – strong/moderate emphasis %</b>	<b>No %</b>	<b>Refer to others %</b>	<b>Numbers responding to question</b>
Interpersonal communication	<b>98.2%</b>	88.2% / 10.0%	<b>0.9%</b>	<b>0.9%</b>	220
Conflict management	<b>98.2%</b>	83.2% / 15.0%	<b>0.5%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	220
Factors that sustain and protect relationships	<b>95.8%</b>	68.7% / 27.1%	<b>3.3%</b>	<b>0.9%</b>	220
Relationship stages and changes	<b>95.0%</b>	67.0% / 28.0%	<b>4.6%</b>	<b>0.5%</b>	218
Commitment and work-life balance	<b>92.5%</b>	50.2% / 42.3%	<b>7.4%</b>	<b>0.0%</b>	215
The meaning of the marriage vows	<b>92.0%</b>	62.0% / 30.0%	<b>3.8%</b>	<b>4.2%</b>	213
Impact of parenthood	<b>89.0%</b>	41.9% / 47.1%	<b>10.0%</b>	<b>1.0%</b>	210
Sexuality and its expression in marriage	<b>87.4%</b>	43.3% / 44.2%	<b>9.8%</b>	<b>2.8%</b>	215
Issues arising from families of origin	<b>86.1%</b>	47.4% / 38.8%	<b>12.0%</b>	<b>1.9%</b>	209
Marriage as a sacrament	<b>85.3%</b>	53.2% / 32.1%	<b>4.1%</b>	<b>10.6%</b>	218
Marital Spirituality	<b>84.4%</b>	30.8% / 53.6%	<b>8.5%</b>	<b>7.1%</b>	211
The rite of marriage	<b>75.6%</b>	33.0% / 42.6%	<b>11.5%</b>	<b>12.9%</b>	209
Christian life and service as a couple/family	<b>65.7%</b>	25.4% / 40.3%	<b>27.9%</b>	<b>6.5%</b>	201
Managing money	<b>62.8%</b>	17.4% / 45.4%	<b>34.8%</b>	<b>2.4%</b>	207
Fertility awareness and family planning	<b>53.1%</b>	15.0% / 38.2%	<b>30.0%</b>	<b>16.9%</b>	207

A notable observation at the outset is the range in percentage values for the 15 different topics that were covered either ‘with a strong emphasis’ or ‘with a moderate emphasis’ – from 98.2% (interpersonal communication and conflict management) to 53.1% (fertility awareness and family planning). This variation indicates that marriage preparation courses differ in their content,

<sup>23</sup> The percentages do not always add to 100.0% due to the rounding of decimal points up or down.

supported by the varied length of courses shown previously. This may reflect the tailoring of courses to specific needs (see Chapter 5 – *Recruitment and support of Marriage Preparation providers*); the fact that only certain content can be delivered in the shortest of courses (see previous delivery section); and supports a need for a core or common curriculum (see Chapter 7 – *Policy and Guidelines for the future provision of Marriage Preparation [including delivery and content]*).

Viewing the topics listed under ‘other’, in addition to those prescribed in the question, provides further illustration of the range of course content. These included:

- Couple behaviour copied by children
- Stages of child development
- Roles within marriage
- Employment /redundancy
- Forgiveness, roles, love is a decision
- Pre-conception health plan
- Importance of Self esteem
- The challenges faced by marriages in the modern world
- IVF.

In terms of the content itself, the top five topics share the theme of helping couples deal with changes and pressures that arise in couple relationships. These included interpersonal communication; conflict management; factors that sustain and protect relationships; pressures that can occur during the stages and changes of relationships; and commitment and work-life balance. This concurs with the ‘coping strategies and skills’ reported in the conference discussion groups (see Chapter 7 – *Policy and Guidelines for the future provision of Marriage Preparation [including delivery and content]*).

When broken down into just those responses that included a ‘strong emphasis’ (see column 3 of Table 4), interpersonal communication and conflict management were 20 and 15 percentage points ahead, respectively, of the third (factors that sustain and protect relationships) at 88.2% and 83.2% respectively. This reinforces the point that the overall focus of the course was towards the coping skills to sustain and preserve relationship harmony (as were several other courses outlined earlier (see Chapter 2 – *Study context: Brief review of existing literature*)).

Interestingly, there is less detail about the *specific* factors associated with strain that could contribute towards a greater need for coping skills. The impact of parenthood was not included in 10% of programmes, and only included with a 'strong emphasis' in 41.9%. This raises some concern given the transition to parenthood is well understood as a potential time of relationship stress (Doss et al 2009, Mitnick et al 2009, Twenge et al 2003). The evidence surrounding this transition warrants inclusion in all marriage preparation programmes.

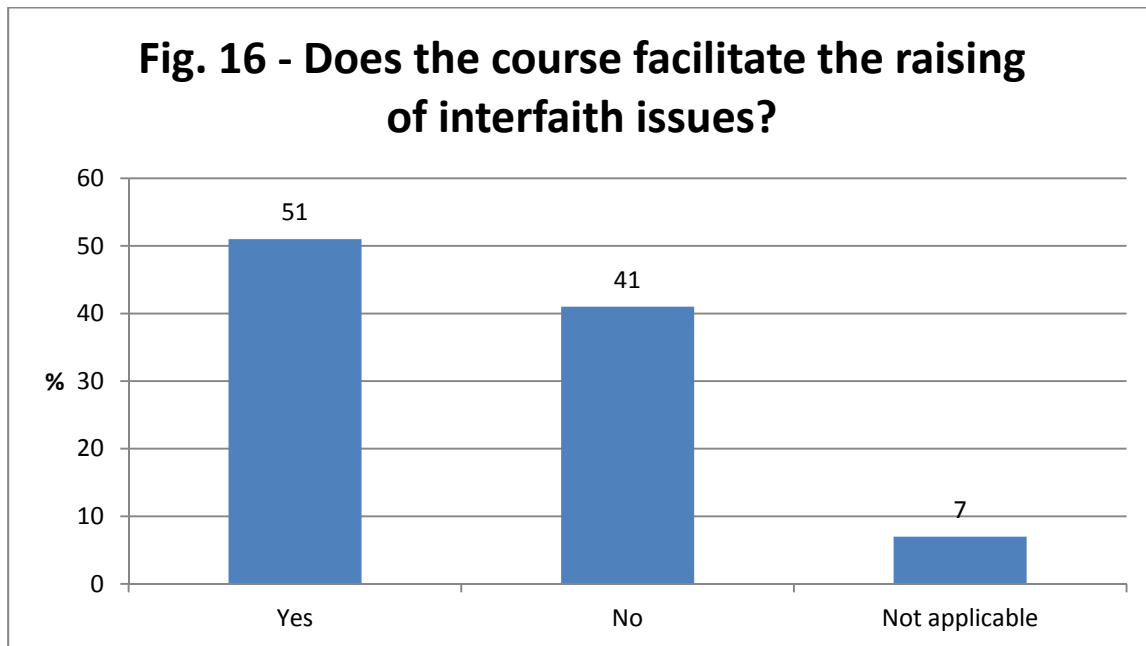
Although managing money is also included as a pressure on relationships (included in 62.8% of programmes), it is not clear whether additional contributors to relationship strain such as ill-health, influence of others (e.g. parents in-law), unequal balance of control, etc (Chang & Barrett 2008; Ramm 2010; Walker et al., 2011) are included within the coping strategies inherent in the first five themes. Additionally, it may be of interest to know the higher-level socio-demographic factors associated with declines in relationship quality and increased likelihood of relationship breakdown such as early age at marriage and having experienced parental divorce. It may also be relevant, again at a broader level, to recognise the periods during which marriages commonly come under pressure (for example, that 16.2% of marriages breakdown within the first five years and 44.3% within the first 10 years, ONS 2012). Likewise it is not clear whether there is reference to relationship support, the different options available (face-to-face, telephone and online), and the extreme importance of seeking this support at an early stage.

From a more positive perspective, it would be interesting to explore the exact content of the theme concerning sustaining and protective factors. Certainly, one core element of relationships is a recognition that relationship work can make a difference, that relationships are not fatalistically determined and that people can themselves really make a difference when relationships come under strain (see Coleman's 'developmental' and 'non-developmental' perspectives research, 2011). From an evaluation perspective, the overall recommendation is for greater clarity of the content headings to help the interpretation of the findings.

A further point of interest from Table 4 is the 'referral to others for support' column, most notably in terms of fertility awareness and family planning (16.9%), the rite of marriage (12.9%), and marriage as a sacrament (10.6%). The latter may reflect some of the concerns raised in the open ended comments by a few couples over the limited content attached to the Catholic faith (see Chapter 4 – *Recruitment of couples and their views of Marriage Preparation*).



Aside to money issues mentioned above, other areas not included in some courses (the 'No' column) were fertility awareness and family planning (30.0%), Christian life and service as a couple/family (27.9%) and issues arising from families of origin (12.0%). The latter two findings are pertinent given the proportion of interchurch marriages (see Figure 3)<sup>24</sup> and that 41% of providers stated that the course did not facilitate interfaith issues<sup>25</sup> (Figure 16):



Indeed, the open-ended comments in the provider survey explored further how the course facilitates the raising of interfaith issues. Some responses provided minimal detail beyond stating how they were raised during general discussion. On occasions, the providers gave more detail about how interfaith issues were raised in the general content of the course, for example:

*“It [inter-faith issues] is raised as an issue where relevant to the couples taking part. It is part of a general discussion of the different gifts each person brings to a marriage”.*

*“Within the module on Spirituality we discuss how their own personal spirituality affects the way they view the world, and how this affects their relationship if their spirituality is different... We ask*

<sup>24</sup> 45% of providers stated that a quarter or less of their couples were both Catholic, and 41% of couple marriages were not Catholic-Catholic (Chapter 3 – *Study context: Profile of survey respondents*).

<sup>25</sup> In the context of the survey and this report, interchurch marriages describes marriages between a Catholic and a Christian of another denomination whereas inter-faith marriages, also known as interreligious marriages, describe a marriage between a Christian and a person of another faith. It is worth noting that provider responses to the interfaith question suggested a lack of clarity between these terms and their meaning.

*them to make an effort to understand each other's spirituality and to respect the commitment to their different faiths".*

Interfaith issues were also brought to the fore by the providers acknowledging that these issues were relevant to many couples taking the course, for example:

*"By acknowledging that the majority of couples are not both Catholics, one of the sheets we use asks about individuals' relationship with God and another poses questions about whether children will be baptised and go to a Catholic school."*

*"By publicising, at the outset of the day-long event, that three of the (normally) four couples leading the event are themselves "interfaith" (in all three cases one Catholic, one Anglican)."*

Some providers gave more detail in their open-ended responses and mentioned specific sessions that acknowledged interfaith issues, for example:

*"Separate 2 1/2 hour evening exclusively for Catholics marrying any non-Catholics, with a lot of time devoted to answering their questions and concerns, as well as dispelling misinformation and encouraging them to become aware of the values that they do share."*

*"In the course there is mention of issues that can arise from the fact that the partners may not share the same faith. This is pursued in one-to-one discussions. In this part of the world we don't have many strictly inter-faith marriages."*

Also in further detail, some specific resources were mentioned that were recommended for interfaith couples, for example:

*"We discuss it in general at the first session and follow it up if any of the couples wish to. We also refer couples to the book 'Surviving being married to a Catholic'."*

*"We provide material - a resource pack for couples by Interfaith Relationships - web site for their further reading."*

### **c) Providers' views on how they saw their role of marriage preparation within the broader life and mission of the Church**

Aside to the specific topics delivered in the course, providers were also asked to express their views on how they saw their role in marriage preparation contributing to the broader life and mission of the Church. Taking the survey open-ended comments and the conference discussion groups as a whole, five key viewpoints were seen. They were:

#### **1. Through sharing the Church's teaching on the sacrament of marriage:**

This was a particularly frequent response. Although not providing much in detail, it does suggest that increasing couples' understanding of the sacrament of marriage is a critical contribution of marriage preparation to the broader life and mission of the Church. For example:

*"When I was a MPP I believed then, and still do, that marriage is the cornerstone of family life. I believe we should give couples the best possible start in their marriage by giving them a good understanding of their sacrament and vocation and living it out the way God wants them to."*

*"Marriage is one of the Sacraments. By helping couples to understand what it takes to sustain a loving & supportive relationship we hope to help them build a positive life for themselves..."*

*"Couples attending the course may have a more realistic view of what being married entails and will have strategies to deal with problems as they arise. These things should help to keep the couples married with the resulting sacramental demonstration being a positive sign to the church. It also helps my wife and I to review our married relationship so that our sacrament is being regularly refreshed too."*

#### **2. Increasing couple involvement in the Church:**

The providers frequently mentioned how delivering marriage preparation presented an opportunity to increase couple involvement in the Church. Undertaking the course was seen as a means of attracting those who had not been involved with the Church for a while as well as new, first-time visitors. For example:

*“Many couples have been “resting Catholics” before deciding to get married in the Church. We feel one of the most important roles is to welcome them into the parish and to the Church.”*

*“Part of our witness of Christian life to couples who may or may not be already part of the Church.”*

Integral to this aspect was providing a non-judgmental welcome and challenging the stereotypical view of Church teaching, making it more welcoming and user-friendly, as well as providing a sense of accompaniment. For example:

*“Meeting couples where they are and offering a non-judgmental experience of belonging and welcome...”*

*“Offer a ‘journey in faith’ experience throughout the marriage preparation... offer ourselves, our reality. ‘We are in this together’.”*

Providing a more friendly welcome was a means of addressing some of the barriers to couple involvement, for example:

*“Barriers to connecting couples to life of parish. Do not attend/do not feel welcome/feel judged/marrying or living elsewhere. Very large parishes have little sense of community (sometimes).”*

A positive welcome would enable the Church to not only appear ‘friendly’ but also enhance the quality of the support offered to couples, for their marriage as well as in the broader life of the Church, for example:

*“A forum, parish based for listening, sharing, learning. The couples are a treasure for our community...how do we include and listen to them?”*

### **3. Deepening awareness of marriage as a vocation and a response to the universal call to holiness**

Whereas the above responses refer mostly to reintegrating couples into the Church, further responses emphasised the importance of enhancing the deeper faith life of the couple and their own sense of participation in the broader life of the church. For example:

*“It is critical that marriage prep incorporates the sense of vocation and thus [couples’] value to us as a parish community.”*

*“Teach about vocation from our own experience and stories. Talk about our stories-real stories- of marriage.”*

*“We believe that building relationship between two people who are in the image of God is extremely important. We believe it is even better if couples understand that they can be in a relationship with a loving God and their marriage can be seen as a ‘cord of three strands’. ... Loving God, loving others and demonstrating this is, to us, the central mission of the Church.”*

*“This Ministry helps couples to realise further the presence of God in their relationship and each other and offers tools to live out their love more generously.”*

*“I see new couples as forming the very cells in the body of the Universal Church. The strength of the body depends on the health of the cells.”*

*“Marriage and family is a fundamental building block of the Christian community as well as of society as a whole. We try to emphasise the difference between a Christian marriage and any other form of civil union. We open people to the concept of vocation to marriage and parenthood.”*

#### **4. Laying a firm foundation for the future**

Providers also mentioned the ongoing and longer-term impacts of marriage preparation as a contribution to the broader life and mission of the Church. These impacts were expressed as having positive benefits for the couple relationship, for their families, for society as a whole and therefore also for the Church. For example:

*“Good preparation for marriage promotes stable relationships and a firm foundation for parenthood and family life. Catholic family life is the bedrock of the church. Parents are the first educators of their children who in turn are the future church. The ministry of preparing couples for marriage is therefore of huge impact to the mission of the church.”*

*“...by emphasising the Catholic Church’s focus on longevity and sustainability of marriage; that marriage is good for couples, their children and life in general. “*

*“It shows that the Church is interested in more than the spiritual side of things. It gives very valuable tools to couples to, hopefully, help them stay together and become a good, solid couple or maybe family unit.”*

*“Helps them to see Catholic Marriage as part of Church life as a whole; sets it within the sacramental life of the community particularly as they look forward to having children and passing on the faith.”*

*“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... Within this nuclear family, their children will have a better chance of growing up in security and trust and hence learning the Catholic lifestyle.”*

## **5. Affirming marriage and preventing marital breakdown**

Through affirming marriage, the marriage preparation course and the increased involvement of the Church were seen as having key roles in preventing marital breakdown and the negative impacts that are associated with this. For example:

*“Divorce is very destructive for the husband and the wife in Spiritual terms. The Children suffer too.”*

*“Marriage is a huge commitment on the part of the couple and it is quite awe-inspiring to think about the nature of the vows they make, which are ‘until death do us part’. Marriage breakdown has been increasing in society and the effects on families can be devastating, emotionally & financially. As the teaching of the Church is that marriage is for life we must help couples to really understand the nature of the commitment they are making.”*

## Summary points from Chapter 6 – Existing delivery and content of the Marriage Preparation programme

- ✓ A wide variety of professionals delivered marriage preparation courses. The three leading providers reported by couples were Parish Marriage Preparation provider (28% of those couples surveyed reported this as their provider), Marriage Care centre (26%) and Parish Priest (22%). Note that a person could choose more than one provider for this question, illustrating the value of 'team' delivery (see Chapter 2 – *Study context: Brief review of existing literature*).
- ✓ In terms of course length, the most striking observation is that 55% of couples reported their course as one day or less (assuming that weekends and evenings amounted to more than one day). The proportion of providers who reported their courses as eight hours or less was 78%, although an earlier question on the provider survey revealed that 53% delivered courses for a day or less (which is closer to the finding from the couple survey). These intensively delivered courses are shorter than the optimum of 8-9 sessions shown in Chapter 2 (*Study context: Brief review of existing literature*).
- ✓ Overall, the varying lengths of courses showed that there is no standardised length of delivery, although the majority are usually around one day.
- ✓ The number of courses expected to be delivered during 2010 (assumed to be the entire year of 2010) varied from one to over 12. 42% of providers expected to deliver two or three courses and 81% between one and six courses.
- ✓ The longer serving providers tended to deliver more courses per year compared to the newer recruits (perhaps unsurprisingly). These results illustrate how new providers will not necessarily mean an immediate increase in the number of courses, since it will take time for them to deliver the same amount of courses per year as the longer serving providers.
- ✓ The busiest months of delivery are within the first part of the year, with a further less substantial peak in Autumn. The busiest month was March (55% of providers ticked this), followed closely by April (41%), February (40%), and May (40%). As expected this is in contrast to the busiest months for marriage. As shown in Chapter 3 – *Study context: Profile of survey respondents*, 40% of marriages occurred during August and September. This also reflects the average time the

course was taken prior to marriage. Figure 1 in Chapter 3 showed that 74% completed their marriage preparation course between one and six months before their wedding.

- ✓ With the relatively few courses taking place during the summer months, there is clearly greater demand at the start and towards the end of the year. This increases the need for more providers at certain times than others and complicates the need for provision compared to the courses being spread more evenly throughout the year.
- ✓ Nearly one-half (47%) of providers stated that their programme was developed through 'an organisation' as opposed to them self, them self in a team, their Parish Priest or Diocese. Of these 'organisations', Marriage Care was by far the most represented (94%), thus mirroring earlier findings on provider training being mostly with Marriage Care.
- ✓ There was a wide variety in topics covered in marriage preparation courses. The extent to which the 15 main topics were covered with a 'strong' or 'moderate' emphasis on courses ranged from 53.1% (fertility awareness and family planning) to 98.2% (interpersonal communication and conflict management). This variation indicates that marriage preparation courses differ in their content, supported by the variation in length of courses shown previously. This finding may reflect the tailoring of courses to specific needs or the fact that only certain content can be delivered in the shortest of courses, and supports a need for a core or common curriculum.
- ✓ The top five topics share the theme of helping couples deal with changes and pressures that arise. These were interpersonal communication; conflict management; factors that sustain and protect relationships; pressures that can occur during the stages and changes of relationships; and commitment and work-life balance.
- ✓ When broken down to those responses that included a 'strong emphasis' as opposed to 'strong' or 'moderate', interpersonal communication and conflict management were 20 and 15 percentage points ahead, respectively, of the third (factors that sustain and protect relationships) at 88.2% and 83.2% respectively. This reinforces the point towards the overall emphasis of the course on the coping skills to sustain and preserve relationship harmony (as were other course outlined in Chapter 2 – *Study context: Brief review of existing literature*).



- ✓ Despite being recognised as an increased time of relationship strain, the impact of parenthood was not included in 10% of programmes, and only included with a 'strong emphasis' in 41.9%.
- ✓ It is not clear whether additional contributors to relationship strain such as ill-health, influence of others (e.g. parents in-law), unequal balance of control, etc are included through the coping strategies inherent in the first five themes noted above.
- ✓ It is also not clear whether there is reference to relationship support, the different options available (face-to-face, telephone and online), and the extreme importance of seeking this support at an early stage. Likewise, it would be interesting to know whether the courses conveyed that relationship work can make a difference, that relationships are not fatalistically determined and that people can themselves really make a difference when relationships come under strain.
- ✓ The most common topics not included were managing money (34.8% of courses did not include this); fertility awareness and family planning (30.0%); Christian life and service as a couple/family (27.9%); and issues arising from families of origin (12.0%). The latter two findings are pertinent given that 41% of providers stated that the course did not facilitate interfaith issues (note that 41% of couple marriages were not Catholic-Catholic).
- ✓ The open-ended comments in the provider survey asked how the course facilitates the raising of interfaith issues. Most responses provided minimal detail beyond stating how they were raised during general discussion, although some mentioned specific sessions and resources were used to raise this issue.
- ✓ Providers were also surveyed (in an open ended non-quantifiable question) to express their views on how they saw their role of marriage preparation within the broader life and mission of the Church. The five key viewpoints were: Through 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.

## **Chapter 7 – Policy and Guidelines for the future provision of Marriage Preparation (including delivery and content)**

The preceding chapters of the report have outlined the existing practice of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church. Some of these chapters have introduced ways to improve future delivery, for example, by providing on-going support to couples or improving the networking opportunities for providers. This final chapter of the results presents more detailed suggestions for the future provision of marriage preparation.

It is important to note at the outset that the data presented here are *suggestions* for future delivery and content made by those contributing to the research (providers, conference participants, etc). This is distinct to the *recommendations* which are an independent assessment of all the evidence (that may include some of these suggestions) – an area to be covered in the final chapter of this report (Chapter 8 – *Overall recommendations and priorities for future action*). Therefore, at this stage, all suggested ideas for the future of marriage preparation will be presented, with the final chapter offering some judgment over this and other evidence presented in the report.

The main source of data for these suggestions comes from the conference, both the group work discussion sessions and particularly from the 105 evaluation forms. There is also some limited evidence from the couple and provider survey.

The evidence in this chapter supports the main aim of the study in finding ways for the Church to provide the best support possible for marriage. At a deeper level, earlier sections of this report have shown that increasing the number of couples in receipt of marriage preparation, and the recruitment and retention of providers to deliver this preparation are key, alongside a need to ensure that the content of what is delivered is appropriate and effective. Accordingly, these final set of findings will be presented under four main headings:

- Suggestions for the future delivery and implementation of marriage preparation;
- Suggestions to boost provider and couple recruitment;
- Suggestions for future content of marriage preparation courses;
- Evaluation of marriage preparation courses.

Each section will be presented in turn.

## **7.1 Suggestions for the future delivery and implementation of Marriage Preparation**

The ideas for future policy in the area of delivery and implementation stem from three main areas: High-level policy/national guidelines; the Diocese-level; and role of the Bishops and Priests.

### **a) High-level policy/national guidelines**

The high-level policy comments were dominated by a request for an agreed national directive or policy for marriage preparation, to replace the varied types of provision, which are sometimes perceived as ad hoc. Comments requesting national guidelines included:

*“A National Marriage Preparation policy.”*

*“Guidelines please i.e. who covers what, priests, Marriage Preparation team.”*

Underpinning a national policy on marriage preparation was the need for all groups (Providers, Bishops, Priests, etc.) to work together, and be clear about each others’ roles. For example:

*“Please can we work together as one Church on this very important work? This is little direction; hence the huge range of courses and material—all covering certain areas as best they can—none doing all.”*

*“This is a programme that needs the support of the Bishops and Priests working together with the marriage prep providers.”*

In addition, there was also a need to be clear whether marriage preparation should be a compulsory, rather than voluntary requirement for people getting married into a Catholic Church. The majority opinion was that it should be compulsory, for example:

*“To insist that couples experience Marriage Preparation if they are marry in Church and there should be good quality training.”*

Interestingly, the literature review presented evidence that a programme being mandatory or voluntary would have little impact on its value (See Chapter 2 *Study context: Brief review of existing literature*, Center for Marriage and Family, 1997). A further suggestion was that marriage preparation, aside to being compulsory, should also be a standard programme (see later for suggestions on content):

*“Marriage preparation should be a standard program throughout the UK and should be mandatory for all Catholic marriages—a talk by a parish priest is not enough.”*

#### **b) Diocese-level suggestions**

The above section dealt with policy suggestions at the national/Conference level. The following sections outline suggestions at a more specific level, starting first with the Diocese, followed by those relating specifically to the Bishops and Priests. In similar fashion to the national suggestions, there was a clear sense that people needed to be more aware about the provision of marriage preparation. Bringing people together, as in the conference was essential and greatly appreciated. For example:

*“Raise awareness of what is happening already among all priests in all dioceses.”*

*“Ensure this, as an annual conference, is instigated.”*

In the evaluation forms, participants suggested that there should be a ‘structure’ (such as a designated post) in place at the Diocese level to foster this exchange of communication. For example:

*“Each diocese should have “someone or a group” that oversees all of this work and enables diocesan sharing and learning sessions to take place annually.”*

*“Every diocese should have a family life and marriage coordinator/office.”*

### **c) Role of the Bishops and Priests**

There was a general belief that a clearer line of communication between the Bishops and Priests would improve the co-ordination of marriage preparation. This is particularly significant as the Bishops play an integral role in the implementation of marriage preparation by communicating its importance to the Parish Priests. To illustrate:

*“Need for the bishops to further embrace and recommend all parish priests to use this valuable resource of marriage providers.”*

*“More top down encouragement to priests to promote marriage prep.”*

The referral role of the Parish Priest was seen as central to the implementation of marriage preparation, and the co-ordination between the providers and couples. Parish Priests being more informed about marriage preparation was considered essential:

*“As I have commented on other occasions many of our priests need to be educated about and understand the importance of good marriages.”*

*“How do we get Priests to inform couples of how important it is to go on a marriage prep course?”*

In appreciation of their central role, there were further suggestions about providing Priests with more support and opportunities to realise the important benefits of marriage preparation:

*“To support parish priests in outcomes of this conference—not just a directive. Bring together to affirm what they do and provide support for future Marriage Preparation they want/need them to do.”*

*“Would be wonderful if the message could filter through to all priests, the vital need for good, encouraging preparation from them for couples to complement prep-days.”*

## 7.2 Suggestions to boost provider and couple recruitment

For marriage preparation to provide the best support possible for marriage, it is essential that strategies are employed to increase provider and couple recruitment. This section outlines the main suggestions.

### a) Recruitment and support for providers

Relevant findings for this section were derived from a range of sources: survey findings, the conference discussion groups and the conference evaluation forms. The need to recruit more providers is compounded by the low proportion of new providers at the time of survey (22% of providers had been practicing for three years or less compared to 51% of who had been practicing for more than seven years – see Figure 2). This section will start with specific suggestions to boost the recruitment of providers and this will be followed by some higher-level policy suggestions.

The importance of being recommended to become a provider was highlighted in the earlier Chapter 5 (*Recruitment and support of Marriage Preparation providers*) whereby 38% of couples responded positively about becoming a provider. A route for recommending couples as providers on completion of their course was suggested, although it is not known whether this is best immediately after or following a passage of time. As regards to suggestions for the future, the conference discussion groups acknowledged the importance of couples being invited to become involved in provision. These suggestions towards the recruitment of providers, from the couples prepared, were broadly separated into three areas:

- Strategies to provide the offer (i.e. following up the interest from the evaluation form), for example: *“Ask the question on evaluation form – would they like to be a volunteer for marriage prep and give acceptance with appropriate email.”*
- Giving potential providers an insight into roles (i.e. taster days and filling support roles in training); and
- Maintaining regular contact to ensure those interested would have the opportunity to express this, even if it was not apparent shortly after their own experience (i.e. support groups, reunions, anniversary cards, etc.).

The more traditional marketing techniques were also seen as possible routes for the recruitment of providers:

*“Publicise MPPs [<sup>26</sup>Marriage Preparation Programmes]; Catholic papers; photographs / glossy pics and invite parishioners to attend...”.*

In considering the suitability of providers, the conference discussion groups revealed that the willingness and life experience of prospective providers were more important to them than formal qualifications. For example:

*“Life experience--don't undervalue it!”*

This life experience also included being married, although there were mixed views over what length of marriage would be ideal, for example:

*“Two year's experience of marriage.”*

*“Newly married perhaps could do some input on a gradual basis until they had been married for 5 years, then do courses.”*

Good relational skills, flexibility and a keen interest to learn were also seen as desirable qualities, for example:

*“Skills: Personal, relationship, teamwork, flexible, relate to engaged couples.”*

*“Skills: Welcoming, administrative/paperwork.”*

There was also a suggestion that more diversity in providers would be welcomed and support the provision of courses to a wider range of couples:

*“Try and encourage younger couples to join and there should be more mixture of cultures. At the conference there were only 8 ethnic minorities of our 196 participants.”*

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<sup>26</sup> Comments in square brackets are not taken verbatim, but are inserted for the reader to understand the context of the comment.

At the higher policy level, as throughout this chapter, there was once more a suggestion for improved co-ordination with providers in the future. This was particularly at the local level between the Parish Priests and the providers, further emphasising the key role of the former in supporting the provision of the courses. For example:

*“Links between parish priests and Marriage Preparation providers are absolutely key.”*

*“This is a programme that needs the support of the Bishops and Priests working together with the Marriage Preparation providers.”*

More specifically, this co-ordination was essential in ensuring both groups knew what was being provided so that all important aspects were covered:

*“Clarity of roles of Marriage Preparation providers and parish priests – so no gaps.”*

*“Having the priests involved in delivering the courses and support the presenters so that they can make the link between the theology and relationship aspects of the courses.”*

The participants in the conference also, however, recognised that there would have to be the necessary staff and resources in place to support the expansion of marriage preparation providers. For example:

*“We need resources and cooperation to train and support providers.”*

*“Have full time paid Marriage and Family life coordinators in each diocese and parish contact to keep in touch with priests and couples.”*

More providers in the future would also require more ongoing training and support which, as shown in Chapter 5 (*Recruitment and support of Marriage Preparation providers*) was a preference for the majority:

*“Annually recommended CPD and minimum requirement every three years.”*



## **b) Recruitment and support for couples**

As for the providers, a theme running through this report is their desire to recruit more couples into marriage preparation courses. As noted earlier, there are some suggestions that it should be a compulsory requirement to undertake such a course prior to marrying in the Catholic Church. With regard to additional suggestions for recruiting couples, the majority of responses were generated from the conference discussion groups. The responses covered ways to both increase the spread (actual numbers enrolled) and breadth (preparation time including follow-up) of provision. The majority of suggestions were around increasing the 'offer' to couples, making it more attractive for them to attend courses. These offers were providing more integrated support; innovative support options (e.g. online), especially for younger people; prayer; and more follow-up of couples:

More integrated support from the parish (family ministry, youth ministry, sacramental preparation, relationship with priest) and schools (through RE curriculum and relationship education in schools) was widely suggested. For example:

*"More contact with parishes for marriage care courses."*

*"Relationship training in schools is essential – even in primary schools – in a sensitive way i.e. communication/ loyalty/ friendship."*

More innovative options for providing and supplementing relationship support included requests for online learning modules to deepen couples' knowledge of faith and marriage. Also delivering courses via Skype, podcasts, and websites to assist in relationship development (e.g. [www.thecoupleconnection.net](http://www.thecoupleconnection.net)). Other suggestions included marriage enrichment courses, DVD's, mentor couple support, and parish family ministry. For example:

*"Provide different options for how to become prepared: self-study remotely/ blend of self-study and meetings/ existing formats over several sessions."*

*"Greater emphasis on remote preparation through Catholic schools."*

Some of these options may be particularly attractive to younger people, For example:

*“Provide information in Universities/ Wedding Fayres etc.”*

*“Knowledge areas can be delivered remotely – use new technologies: email, website, elearning, texts, Skype, podcasts, Youtube, audio downloads.”*

In relation to the schools, there was also the innovative suggestion to provide marriage preparation at a point of ‘early intervention’, for example:

*“Initiate a group who can go in to schools to teach about relationships and marriage—remote.”*

*“More programmes for young people about relationships, to have healthy relationships.”*

Suggestions for prayer included more celebrations of marriage within the parish as opportunities for catechesis, marking anniversaries, offering bidding prayers, blessing couples, prayers for marriage, etc. For example:

*“Prayers for couples in Church/ Prayers for happiness.”*

*“Having a Mass on behalf of couple in the Parish.”*

In further reference to the increased offer for couples, the conference discussion groups were asked about good practice in offering further and ongoing support for couples, after they were married.

The general importance of this follow-up was recognised by the participants , for example:

*“Ongoing support for couples is vital for the family as well – the family is the domestic Church where our children first learn about the faith. What could be more important than that!”*

*“For it to be Church policy that couples had to have enrichment regularly.”*

More specific ideas to increase the ongoing support to couples, from the discussion groups, were as follows:

- Forward planning to assess interest and raise awareness of follow-up. For example:

*“Plan ahead to encourage participants to have a marriage ‘network’ of help and encouragement.”*

*“Ask in feedback questionnaire if couple would be interested in further courses or becoming Marriage Preparation providers (ask for email address).”*

- Follow-up meetings (social, informational and skill-based courses initiated through annual reunions). For example:

*“Follow up meetings after 1 or 2 years.”*

*“Marriage prep teams to organise a social evening for newly engaged and invite newly weds to share experience.”*

- Regular contact such as email newsletters, anniversary cards and Christmas cards, for example:

*“Write to them a year after wedding.”*

*“Email/ Mailshot nationally.”*

- Reunions during Marriage Week, opportunities to share wedding albums, etc. For example:

*“National Marriage Week Mass / informal get-together.”*

*“Reunion within about a year’s time. Sharing of married life experiences and questions.”*

- A mentoring scheme to facilitate ongoing support, for example:

*“Mentoring within the parish of newly married couples with an established (trained) couple.”*

*“Develop further support (voluntary!). Meet again as a group and with a mentor scheme!”*

*“Mentoring couples in the community--all aspects of married life.”*

- Liturgies (e.g. Marriage Week mass, renewal of vows, anniversary Mass), for example:

*“Personal invitation to a renewal of marriage vows for newly married couples around 14<sup>th</sup> Feb – preferably from the Bishop.”*

*“An annual invitation to a celebration Mass for all couples married in the Church that year with a possibility of a social event afterwards.”*

- Ongoing prayer (e.g. Prayer by the parish, deanery-based retreats for the couples married each year, etc.), for example:

*“Parish prays for each couple for eg 1 month before until 1 month after marriage.”*

The overall views about the importance of ongoing support was also borne out through further comments on the conference evaluation forms, for example:

*“Post-marriage events need to be implemented”.*

*“That ‘follow up’ opportunities could be organized for those married from one to three years and onward.”*

Noting couples’ slightly lower sense of satisfaction in relation to the advance information about what to expect beforehand from marriage preparation (Figure 5), offering some of the additional delivery options and follow-up opportunities may well help to attract more couples. However, as also noted from the conference findings this is likely to require extra resources. For example:

*“Money – investment in human resources at diocesan level to promote, support and encourage marriage and family.”*

*“Funding to put resources into supporting families.”*

Moreover, improved communication networks would be required to facilitate the process of couple recruitment. Above all, the recurring role of the Priests in affecting the recruitment process, this time in the context of couples, is clear:

*“For Parish Priests to have more information about various organisations to be able to channel couples to ‘appropriate’ preparation.”*

There is a possibility that the wide ranging suggestions for extending provision, especially in terms of the breadth of the offer through follow-up initiatives, could increase the recruitment of couples. However, only through further research would the extent of this interest be calculated. There is a clear need to properly trial this before any notable resources are allocated to these suggestions.

### **7.3 Suggestions for future content of Marriage Preparation courses**

In addition to the delivery and implementation of marriage preparation, and the recruitment of more providers and couples, there were also a number of suggestions about course content. Findings were centred on the content of the course and the principles of developing and adhering to a national core curriculum.

#### **a) Course content**

Given that the majority of marriage preparation courses are intensively delivered, with 92% of programmes being 12 hours or less and 78% being eight hours or less (see Figure 12 in Chapter 6 – *Existing delivery and content of the Marriage Preparation programme*), this naturally limits the amount and depth of content. The conference discussion groups showed three leading areas of content that were considered essential:

- Coping strategies and skills, for example:

*“Prepare for ups and downs.”*

*“Conflict resolution needs further ‘modernisation’ and development.”*

- Spiritual aspects and helping couples to understand sacramental marriage better , for example:

*“To realise marriage is a sacrament. To help couples realise the importance of their commitment and that their marriage is a visible sign to others.”*

*“Where couples have been living together for a long time and have reached a stage where they feel ready to commit themselves in marriage, committing publicly in the sight of God; we need to help them celebrate the gift of love they are to each other and are now publicly proclaiming in the presence of God, family and community. To help them understand how this can underpin their marriage and commitment to each other.”*

Specific references to the Spiritual aspects of marriage preparation content included:

*“Use Bishop’s 4 areas as structure: Relational, theological/spiritual, liturgical, canonical<sup>27</sup>.”*

*“Must include – all courses must cover 1) sacrament; 2) Communication; 3) Sex and sexuality; 4) Sacrament is a vocation- an invitation from God to live our lives in a certain way; 5) Family of origin; 6) Self awareness as a fruit of the marriage; 6) Vows – explanation; 7) Conflict management; 8) Married spirituality; 9) Effect of children on couples relationship and preparation; 10) Money and its effect on the relationship.”*

Note that these references contrast with those few negative comments about some courses not being sufficiently ‘Catholic’ (Chapter 4 – *Recruitment of couples and their views of Marriage Preparation*).

- Helping couples to get to know one another better, in particular understanding their differences and potential difficulties. For example:

*“To be able to accept difference and work together on understanding how they might resolve these differences.”*

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<sup>27</sup> During the conference Bishop Richard Moth unpacked Canon 1063 which describes the four areas where pastors of souls are obliged to give assistance to the faithful in order to preserve the Christian character of marriage and enable it to develop in perfection.

*“To help couples to recognise what they are doing well and to identify potential threats to their relationship and to provide ideas/ skills on how to counter these threats.”*

Although to a lesser extent, additional areas mentioned from the conference discussion groups were:

- Offering prophetic witness to marriage
- Bridging the gap between the Church and the couple
- Covering the curriculum
- Fertility awareness
- Finance issues.

It is interesting to compare the priorities for additional content with existing delivery (see Table 4 in Chapter 6 – *Existing delivery and content of the Marriage Preparation programme*). The suggestions for additional content generally mirrored what was already covered, although there were exceptions. The dominant content covered in virtually all programmes was related to coping skills, especially around interpersonal communication and conflict management. In terms of the Spiritual aspects, the meaning of the marriage vows, marital spirituality, and marriage as a sacrament were also often included in programmes. However, the issue of helping couples to get to know one another better and accept differences was probably less present in existing programmes, although this may be covered in some detail in the relationship stages and changes and conflict management. Interestingly there was no suggestions to cover the factors that protect and sustain relationships, the impact of parenthood, and interfaith aspects (although, as noted in Chapter 6, the precise content delivered within the broad topic areas was not always discernable).

#### **b) A core curriculum**

The principle of having a core curriculum was generally positive. For example:

*“National guidelines should be developed for Marriage Preparation, providing standardised programmes.”*

*“A core or common curriculum would be welcomed by all, especially the sacrament of marriage.”*

Participants also mentioned that the core curriculum needed to be written in a manner that was easily interpretable:

*“National guidelines for Marriage Preparation—need to be clear, concise, in plain English.”*

However, in delving into the findings, the principle of a core curriculum was rarely (except for the above illustration) interpreted as meaning a standardised course. Most participants were opposed to having a curriculum that could be overly prescriptive. For example:

*“A core curriculum would be helpful, not to prescribe a course, rather to provide a framework of what is important, what is essential to stop us worrying that we may be missing something essential. To stop us getting bogged down in peripheries, to keep us focused on what God wants.”*

*“Good guidelines but please don’t regiment.”*

The preferences for having a core curriculum that was flexible meant that courses could be readily tailored according to the specific needs of the couples. This flexibility towards meeting specific needs was seen as a key preference:

*“Prescribe minimum criteria of content which can be adopted by parishes/area/organizations according to local needs.”*

*“Beware of being overly prescriptive. Every couple is unique and what we offer must be flexible enough to recognize this.”*

Finally, there was one exception to the majority viewpoint above about having a core curriculum that could be adapted accordingly. This is illustrated below:

*“Diocese/parishes should decide for themselves which materials to use?”*

#### **7.4 Evaluation of Marriage Preparation courses**

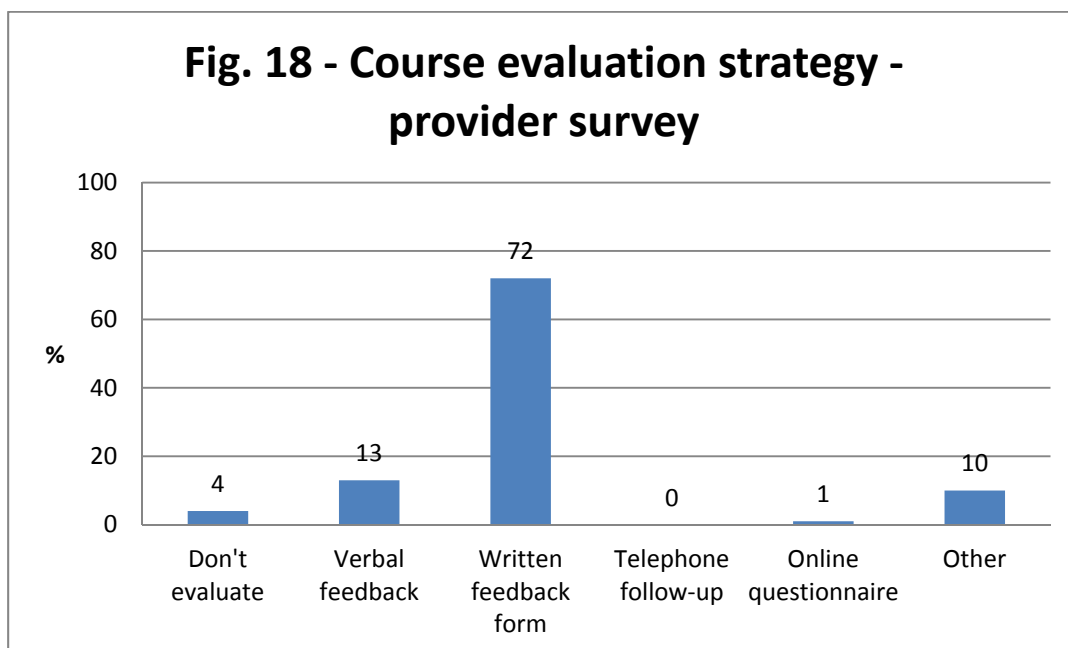
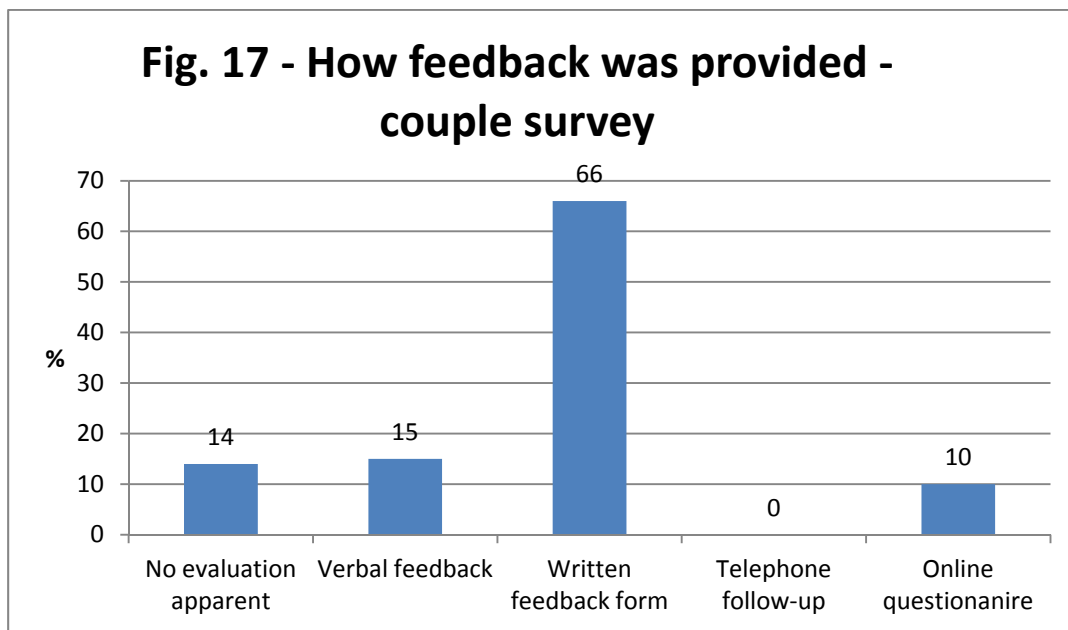
The fact that this report has been compiled from evaluation data in different formats is testament to the Bishops’ Conference’s acceptance that assessing people’s opinions and reactions to marriage



preparation is important. There was a general consensus that conference participants saw the value of evaluation, and recognised it as being core to the future success of marriage preparation:

*“Very important that Marriage Preparation continues to be monitored by the Conference.”*

Findings from both the couple and provider surveys (respectively) show the different means by which couple courses are evaluated (Figures 17 and 18):



Figures 17 and 18 show a number of interesting observations. Firstly, of the several forms of data collection, only the online questionnaire has been made available for this report. However, only a very minimal proportion of courses appeared to use this as an evaluation tool. This raises the issue over whether these additional data are recorded centrally. Note also that there is no standard definition provided for 'verbal feedback' or 'written feedback form' (e.g. whether they followed a prescribed set of questions). Secondly, given the wide variation in techniques, it is clear that there is no consistent means of evaluating marriage preparation courses. Simply put, while written feedback forms are most often completed, this does not apply for all courses; others may exclusively rely on telephone feedback, verbal feedback, etc. Thirdly, there is a worrying percentage of courses that were not evaluated at all – 14% from the couple survey and 4% from the provider survey.

Aside to having a centralised, standardised method of evaluation applicable to all courses, there are additional ways to strengthen the evidence. Although the evaluation data demonstrate the general satisfaction of the courses, these findings have not been matched to the specific courses received. It is for this reason, given the variability in the courses, that aspects of the course that are most/least effective cannot be isolated. This importance of knowing more about 'best practice' was raised by the conference participants:

*"Use what is working well and improve on it."*

*"Draw up a set of resources pooling the best elements from all courses—be clear on why they are the best, explicitly linked to the 4 areas presented in the speech: canonical, theology of marriage, spirituality of marriage, relational aspect."*

There were also two further areas where conference participants thought the evidence-base could be strengthened. Firstly, although satisfaction ratings and perceived impacts of the courses were evaluated, there would be greater merit in following up couples long-term to assess the 'health' of the marriage and establishing whether marriage preparation had played a role. For example:

*"Investigate causes of marriage break-up to see if it has any relation to type and quality of marriage prep."*

*"Need for scientific evaluation? i.e. how effective is Marriage Preparation in preventing marriage breakdown."*

Secondly, there were the occasional comments about increasing the number of couples who provided feedback data. Although the total number of couples undertaking courses is not known (by the Author), it is a certainty that it far exceeds the number of survey entries (n=116) analysed here. Given the variety of evaluation techniques mentioned, it may well be that there are other data held at a more local level that have not been made available to the Catholic Bishops' Committee for Marriage and Family Life.

Finally, it may be expected that this study is confined to those couples who were sufficiently motivated (and arguably the most satisfied) to complete the survey. It would be most interesting, although challenging, to find out the views of those couples who chose not to complete the online survey.

#### **Summary points from Chapter 7 – Policy and Guidelines for the future provision of Marriage Preparation (including delivery and content)**

- ✓ The data presented in this section are suggestions for future delivery, recruitment, and course content made by those contributing to the research (providers, conference participants etc). This is distinct from recommendations which are an independent assessment of all the evidence. The main source of data for these suggestions comes from the conference consultation, both the group discussion sessions and particularly from the 105 evaluation forms.
- ✓ High-level policy comments regarding the delivery and implementation of marriage preparation were dominated by a request for an agreed national directive for marriage preparation. This was set to replace the varied types of provision, which are sometimes perceived as ad hoc,.
- ✓ Underpinning a national policy on marriage preparation was the need for all groups (Providers, Bishops, Priests, etc.) to work together, and be clear about each others' roles.
- ✓ There was also a need to be clear whether marriage preparation should be a compulsory requirement for people getting married into a Catholic Church. The majority opinion was that it should be compulsory. Note that the literature review presented evidence showing that the value of the course was not affected by whether it was mandatory or voluntary to attend.

- ✓ In similar fashion to the national suggestions, there was a clear sense that people needed to be more aware about the provision of marriage preparation. Bringing people together, as in the national conference was essential and greatly appreciated. There were suggestions for a 'structure' (such as a designated staff post) in place at the Diocese level to foster this exchange of communication.
- ✓ There was a general belief that a clearer line of communication between the Bishops and Priests would improve the co-ordination of marriage preparation. This is particularly significant as it is largely the Priests who refer couples to marriage preparation, although the support from the Bishops is essential in stressing its importance.
- ✓ There were further suggestions about providing Bishops and Priests with more support and opportunities to realise the important benefits of marriage preparation. Conveying the benefits of marriage preparation from evidence-based research could help this process.
- ✓ Suggestions for the recruitment of providers is a point of interest throughout this report. Three main suggestions arose: Strategies to provide the offer (i.e. following up the interest from the evaluation form); giving potential trainers an insight into roles; and maintaining regular contact with couples to ensure those interested would have the opportunity to express this, even if it was not apparent shortly after their own experience of marriage preparation.
- ✓ In considering the suitability of providers, the conference discussion groups revealed that the willingness and life experience of prospective providers were more important than formal qualifications. This life experience also included being married<sup>28</sup>, although there were mixed views over how long being married would be ideal.
- ✓ Good relational skills, flexibility and a keen interest to learn were also seen as desirable qualities. There was also a suggestion that more diversity in providers would be welcome and support the provision of courses to a wider range of couples.
- ✓ At the higher policy level, there was once more a suggestion for improved co-ordination of marriage preparation in the future. This was particularly essential at the local level between the Parish Priests and the providers, further emphasising the key role of the former in supporting

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<sup>28</sup> It is perhaps worth noting here a 1996 guideline from the Bishops' Conference regarding the value of also involving those who are divorced and separated in delivery of marriage preparation.

the provision of the courses. More specifically, this co-ordination was essential in ensuring both parties knew what was being provided so that all important aspects were covered.

- ✓ As for the providers, a theme running through this report is the desire to recruit more couples into marriage preparation courses. The responses covered ways to both increase the spread (actual numbers enrolled) and breadth (preparation time including follow-up) of provision. They included more integrated support (from clergy and staff within the Parish); innovative support options (e.g. online, school-based interventions) especially for younger people; prayer; and more follow-up of couples.
- ✓ The broader, longer-term offer of marriage preparation could be perceived as a more attractive proposition to the current one or two day course. Ideas to broaden the offer were: more forward planning to assess interest and raise awareness of follow-up; follow-up meetings; regular contact such as email newsletters, anniversary cards and Christmas cards; reunions; mentoring schemes to facilitate ongoing support; liturgies; and Prayer.
- ✓ Noting couples' slightly lower sense of satisfaction in relation to the advance information about what to expect beforehand from marriage preparation (Figure 5), offering some of the additional delivery options and follow-up opportunities may well help to attract more couples.
- ✓ There is a possibility that the wide ranging suggestions for extending the breadth of the offer, including follow-up initiatives, could increase the recruitment of couples. However, only through further research would the extent of this interest be calculated. There is a clear need to properly trial this before any notable resources are allocated to these suggestions.
- ✓ The conference discussion groups pointed to three leading areas of course content that were considered essential: Coping strategies and skills; spiritual aspects and helping couples to understand sacramental marriage better; and helping couples to get to know one another better, in particular understanding their differences and potential difficulties.
- ✓ It is interesting to compare these priorities with existing content (see Table 4 in previous Chapter 6 - *Existing delivery and content of the Marriage Preparation programme*). The suggestions generally mirrored what was already covered. However, the issue of helping couples to get to know one another better and accept differences was probably less present in existing

programmes, although this may be covered in some detail in the relationship stages and changes and conflict management.

- ✓ Interestingly there was no direct reference for future suggestions towards factors that protect and sustain relationships, the impact of parenthood, and interfaith aspects (although the specific content covered within the existing topic areas is often difficult to discern).
- ✓ The principle of having a core curriculum to follow was generally positive. Participants also mentioned that the core curriculum needed to be written in a manner that was easily interpretable.
- ✓ The principle of a core curriculum was rarely interpreted as meaning a standardised course. Most participants were opposed to having a curriculum that could be overly prescriptive. Flexibility towards meeting specific needs was seen as a key preference.
- ✓ There was a general consensus that conference participants saw the value of evaluation, and recognised it as being core to the future success of marriage preparation.
- ✓ Apart from the online questionnaire, the other forms of evaluation data have not been made available for this report. This raises the issue over whether these evaluation data are recorded centrally. Also, given the wide variation in techniques, it is clear that there is no consistent means of evaluating courses. Standardised evaluation techniques, recorded centrally are strongly recommended. In addition, there is a worrying percentage of courses that were not evaluated at all – 14% of from the couple survey and 4% from the Provider survey.
- ✓ Although the evaluation data demonstrate the general satisfaction of the courses, these findings have not been matched to the specific courses received. It is for this reason, given the variability in the courses, that aspects of courses that are most/least effective cannot be isolated.
- ✓ There were also two areas where conference participants thought the evidence-base could be strengthened. Firstly, although satisfaction ratings and perceived impacts of the courses were evaluated, there would be greater merit in following up couples long-term to assess the 'health' of the marriage and establishing whether marriage preparation had played a role. Secondly, although the total number of couples undertaking courses is not known (by the Author), it is a

certainty that is far exceeds the number of survey entries (n=116) analysed here. Given the variety of evaluation techniques mentioned, it may well be that there are other data held at a more local level that have not been requested by the Catholic Bishops' Committee for Marriage and Family Life.

## **Chapter 8 – Overall recommendations and priorities for future action**

This report has pooled together the evidence from a variety of sources to assess the current picture of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church. This closing chapter provides an independent assessment of the evidence and concludes by presenting a list of recommendations to the Catholic Bishops' Conference.

Prior to these recommendations, this chapter will reflect on the key aim and objectives of the study; summarise the data available to analyse; and outline the key findings. These findings will then link to the closing part of this report by listing the key recommendations.

### **8.1 Study aim and objectives**

The aim of the study is to provide couples in the Catholic Church with the best support possible for their marriage. The specific objectives of the research, as prescribed by the Catholic Bishops' Committee for Marriage and Family Life, are to:

1. Provide scrutiny to the initial analysis of both the survey data and the conference outputs;
2. In relation to the conference recommendation, to develop Guidelines/Core Curriculum for Marriage Preparation (i.e. content and delivery), to assess what evidence of effective practice exists to support this work;
3. To identify contradictions between findings from the couple and provider feedback;
4. To identify, in view of the above, future recommendations and priorities for action.

### **8.2 The data available for analysis**

There were a variety of data available for further scrutiny and analysis. Findings were derived from four main sources as follows:

- An online cross-sectional, questionnaire-based survey self-completed by 116 individuals prepared for marriage during 2010. This comprised a total of 23 questions on profile and experiences of marriage preparation;
- An online cross-sectional, questionnaire-based survey self-completed by 242 marriage preparation providers in England and Wales during 2010. This comprised a total of 22 questions on profile and programme provision;



- Post-it responses from 190 conference participants (working in discussion groups of approximately six people) in response to seven key questions (identified from the survey data by the conference Working Group) around recruitment, provision and content of marriage preparation. An approximate total of 300 discussion group responses;
- Further recommendations, via an evaluation form, from 105 conference participants (mainly marriage preparation providers, service managers, Priests and Bishops). A total of 105 participants provided a response from a total of 190 invited to do so (55.3% response rate).

### **8.3 Summary of main findings**

The summary of the 'headline' findings are outlined below:

#### **a) Review evidence – Key content and delivery of marriage education/preparation programmes**

- Imparting relationship knowledge (e.g. relationship stages and changes, times of relationship strain) appears to be the bedrock of the reviewed programmes. Two further key areas of content are communication skills and relationship quality – both have been shown to improve after marriage preparation (former more so than the latter).
- Communication skills are more easily transferred to couples, compared to actual increases in relationship quality (compounded by a 'ceiling effect' of relatively high relationship quality in preparation for marriage). Core communication skills include problem-solving, diminishing criticism and contempt, and improving listening skills.
- To improve relationship quality, core components concentrate on those factors that correlate strongly with quality such as aligning expectations, managing finances, sharing household chores, and agreement about time together. Improvements in relationship quality can also be rooted in the important associated virtues, such as commitment and forgiveness as well as elements specific to the Catholic Church, such as the sacrament of marriage.
- Minimising conflict and, where this occurs, knowing how to manage this conflict is an integral part of the programmes. Further areas of content include having realistic relationship expectations, exposure to negative family-of-origin experiences, personal stress management, listening skills and partner empathy, commitment, bringing up children, and managing a dual career.
- There is some argument for the content of marriage preparation programmes to be customised to the specific needs of the couple.

- A team approach to this delivery of marriage preparation was preferable i.e. Clergy, lay couples and Parish staff.
- There is an indication that longer programmes, to a certain extent, are more effective. One study found that the reported value of the course increased up to a peak of 8-9 sessions following which a decline in value was reported (although there was no indication of what constituted a 'session'). Sessions longer than those provided in this study (see *Study context: Profile of survey respondents*) were found to be more effective
- For the one study that followed up couples extensively (i.e. for several years) after they completed the course, the value of marriage preparation tended to diminish through time.
- There was no difference in the value attached to courses according to whether they were mandatory or voluntary.
- Those reporting high expectations of the marriage preparation courses reported the highest value.
- Supporting resources and materials, and innovative web-based delivery, may well lead to a greater impact on couples, although the evidence of their effectiveness is limited.

#### **b) Study context: Profile of survey respondents**

- There was a notable proportion of inter-church marriages reported by couples: 59% were Catholic-Catholic and 22% Catholic-Christian of another denomination, and the remainder were Catholic and a person of another faith, Catholic-Agnostic or Catholic-Atheist. From the provider survey, 45% stated that a quarter or less of their couples were both Catholic (compared to 6% of providers reporting that between 80% and 100% of their couples were both Catholic). The provider responses reflect the findings of a separate enquiry with diocesan chancery offices regarding marriages celebrated in 2010. Figures provided by eight of 22 dioceses in England and Wales suggest a proportion of 36% Catholic-Catholic marriages, 48% Catholic-Christian and 16% Catholic and a person of another faith.
- Interestingly, the majority of people responding to the survey appeared to have done so shortly after their marriage preparation course (given that 76% were still to marry and 74% completed their course between one and six months before their wedding). This indicates that the survey was completed when the course was relatively fresh in their minds and therefore provides a reasonably accurate recall of this experience.
- For the majority of couples (55%), marriage preparation courses are for a day or less (assuming a 'series of evenings' and weekend constitute more than one day, and excluding 'other'). The

proportion of providers who reported their courses as eight hours or less was 78%, although an earlier question on the provider survey showed that 53% reported they delivered courses for a day or less (which is closer to the finding from the couple survey).

- The majority (80%) of the providers were a 'Lay Person', rather than an Ordained Priest or Deacon, or a Religious Sister or Brother, and 82% were married.
- The majority (51%) of providers had been preparing couples for marriage for more than seven years, with only 22% for three years or less.

### **c) Recruiting couples and their views of Marriage Preparation**

- Overall, the survey findings suggest that those in receipt of marriage preparation find the experience worthwhile. These findings suggest that if the reach was extended to more couples, they would be equally satisfied.
- There was particularly high satisfaction with the timing, location and accessibility; welcome and hospitality; and integrity of facilitators (all scoring 4 or more out of a possible 5 based on a 5-point likert scale of 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'). Combining these scores, the mean satisfaction rating overall was 3.9 out of 5.
- Interestingly, a notably lower rating (2.7) was given for the advance information about what to expect beforehand. To be precise, 24% of couples rated themselves as 'Not at all' or 'Not very much' satisfied as regards the advance information. In relation, 32% of couples reported it either 'difficult' or 'slightly inconvenient' to 'find information about a marriage preparation course and to organise participation'.
- The overall satisfaction score was compared across several groups. The most noticeable difference in satisfaction was seen between those married and those not yet married (at the time of survey). Unsurprisingly, those people who were less satisfied with the course were less likely to consider becoming a provider.
- Four further headline questions indicated course value: Quality of facilitators; quality of course content; value of course to marriage; and overall experience. All rated highly between 3.8 and 4.2 out of 5. The quality of the overall experience was 4.0 out of 5.0, with 45.9% rating their overall experience as 'excellent'.
- As with the previous satisfaction ratings, there were some notable variations in the overall quality of experience, with a more positive experience reported by the non-married group relative to those married. However, of even greater difference was the higher rating of quality reported by those taking their course more than three months prior to marriage.

- The perceived effects of the course on improving understanding / views were generally positive (e.g. 57% perceived that marriage preparation had improved 'Yourself, partner, relationship').
- Reflecting the general satisfaction, 77% of people would recommend the course to their friends, although 11% would not.
- Comments highlighted the positive role of the providers, and the elements of Catholicism included in the marriage preparation. A minority of people, however, were less satisfied about the course not including sufficient attention to being a Catholic couple.

#### **d) Recruitment and support of Marriage Preparation providers**

- Sustaining high quality providers is essential to the success of marriage preparation. Although there was no indication of the providers' age in the survey (an important omission), the fact that over one-half (51%) of those surveyed had been running marriage preparation for over seven years *suggests* the need to consider future recruits. This compares to 22% of providers practicing for three years or less.
- Is the concern over the recruitment of new providers warranted? Note that an experienced group of marriage preparation providers have, based on the couple experience, been delivering courses that are extremely well received. Moreover, those providers with more experience delivered more courses per year than newer recruits (see *Existing delivery and content of the Marriage Preparation programme*), and have maintained their professional development, with those practicing for more than seven years taking up, on average, 1.7 different types of training opportunities on marriage preparation (more so, as expected than the newer recruits). It is not possible from the data to compare couple course satisfaction with providers' length of service (as they were recorded in separate surveys).
- Fresh attempts to recruit new providers may not be operating as effectively as required, given that only 22% of providers have been practicing for three years or less.
- Nearly one-half (48%) of all providers were most often recruited from a request from 'someone already involved with marriage preparation'. Note that 38% of couples surveyed would consider training to become a course provider. The overall satisfaction of the preparation extended beyond the individual's circumstance to a willingness to share their own positive experience with others.
- This suggests that 'word of mouth' or a direct recommendation may be an influential means of recruitment but, at the same time, this route is often more ad hoc and relies on the providers own judgement about the suitability of a potential provider. Also, the newer providers,

compared to those serving for longer, were more likely to become involved through a direct recommendation from a provider.

- Although the couples were generally satisfied with their preparation, supporting providers in their role is equally important, as provider satisfaction may ultimately impact on couple experience.
- Most people had been trained through Marriage Care (59%). Worryingly, however, a small but significant group (4%) reported no training at all and only 22% had been in receipt of 'regular professional development'.
- Although the majority were trained by Marriage Care, a fair proportion had received additional training. The average number of different types of training courses taken per person was 1.6 for the entire sample, and 1.7 for those trained by Marriage Care. The overall consensus was recognising the necessity for ongoing CPD.
- From the conference discussion groups, mentoring and supervision were viewed as being an integral component of support and networking.
- It is also significant (from the conference discussion groups and evaluation forms) that a proportion of providers preferred to have more support.

#### **e) Existing delivery and content of the marriage preparation programme**

- A wide variety of practitioners delivered marriage preparation courses. The three leading providers reported by couples were Parish Marriage Preparation provider (28% of those couples surveyed reported this as their provider), Marriage Care centre (26%) and Parish Priest (22%). It is worth noting that some of those assumed to be parish-based providers might belong to a diocesan or Marriage Care team who were delivering marriage preparation in that parish on that day.
- There is no standardised length of course delivery, although the majority are usually around one day.
- The number of courses expected to be delivered during 2010 (assumed to be the entire year of 2010) varied from one to over 12. 42% of providers expected to deliver two or three courses and 81% between one and six courses.
- The longer serving providers tended to deliver more courses per year compared to the newer recruits (perhaps unsurprisingly). These results illustrate how new providers will not necessarily mean an immediate increase in the number of courses, since it will take time for them to deliver the same amount of courses per year as the longer serving providers.

- The busiest months of delivery are within the first part of the year, with a further less substantial peak in Autumn. The busiest month was March (55% of providers ticked this – they could tick more than one option), followed closely by April (41%), February (40%), and May (40%). As expected this is in contrast to the busiest months for marriage.
- With the relatively few courses during the summer months, there is clearly greater demand at the start and towards the end of the year. This increases the need for more providers at certain times than others and complicates the need for provision compared to the courses being spread more evenly throughout the year.
- Nearly one-half (47%) of providers stated that their programme was developed through ‘an organisation’ as opposed to them self, them self in a team, their Parish Priest or Diocese. Of these ‘organisations’, Marriage Care was by far the most represented (94%), thus mirroring earlier findings on provider training being mostly with Marriage Care.
- There was a wide variety in topics covered in marriage preparation courses. The extent to which the 15 main topics were covered with a ‘strong’ or ‘moderate’ emphasis on courses ranged from 53.1% (fertility awareness and family planning) to 98.2% (interpersonal communication and conflict management). This variation indicates that marriage preparation courses differ in their content, supported by the variation in length of courses shown previously. This finding may reflect the tailoring of courses to specific needs or the fact that only certain content can be delivered in the shortest of courses, and supports a need for a core or common curriculum.
- The top five topics share the theme of helping couples deal with the changes and pressures that might arise. These were interpersonal communication; conflict management; factors that sustain and protect relationships; pressures that can occur during the stages and changes of relationships; and commitment and work-life balance.
- When broken down to those responses that included a ‘strong emphasis’ as opposed to ‘strong’ or ‘moderate’, interpersonal communication and conflict management were 20 and 15 percentage points ahead, respectively, of the third (factors that sustain and protect relationships) at 88.2% and 83.2% respectively. This reinforces the point towards the overall emphasis of the course on the coping skills to sustain and preserve relationship harmony (as were other course outlined in Chapter 2 – *Study context: Brief review of existing literature*).
- Despite being recognised as an increased time of relationship strain, the impact of parenthood was not included in 10.0% of programmes, and only included with a ‘strong emphasis’ in 41.9%.
- The most common topics not included were managing money (34.8% of courses did not include this); fertility awareness and family planning (30.0%); Christian life and service as a couple/family (27.9%); and issues arising from families of origin (12.0%). The latter two findings are pertinent

given that 41% of providers felt that the course did not facilitate the raising of interfaith issues (note that 41% of couple marriages were not Catholic-Catholic).

- The open-ended comments in the provider survey asked how the course facilitates the raising of interfaith issues. Most responses provided minimal detail beyond stating how they were raised during general discussion, although some mentioned specific sessions and resources were used to raise this issue.
- Providers were also surveyed (in an open ended non-quantifiable question) to express their views on how they saw their role of marriage preparation within the broader life and mission of the Church. The five key viewpoints were: Through 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.

#### **f) Policy and Guidelines for the future provision of Marriage Preparation (including delivery and content)**

- High-level policy comments regarding the delivery and implementation of marriage preparation were dominated by a request for an agreed national directive for marriage preparation. This was set to replace the varied types of provision, which are sometimes perceived as ad hoc.
- Underpinning a national policy on marriage preparation was the need for all groups (Providers, Bishops, Priests, etc.) to work together, and be clear about each other's roles.
- The majority opinion was that marriage preparation should be compulsory for people getting married in a Catholic Church.
- In similar fashion to the national suggestions, there was a clear sense that people needed to be more aware about the provision of marriage preparation. Bringing people together, as in the national conference was essential and greatly appreciated. There were suggestions for a 'structure' (such as a designated staff post) in place at the Diocesan level to foster this exchange of communication.
- There was a general belief that a clearer line of communication between the Bishops and Priests would improve the co-ordination of marriage preparation, as would clearer communication between providers.
- There were several suggestions for increasing the recruitment of providers and couples (see forthcoming section on recommendations).

- In considering the suitability of providers, the conference discussion groups suggested that the willingness and life experience of prospective providers were more important than formal qualifications. This life experience also included being married, although there were mixed views over how long being married would be ideal.
- Good relational skills, flexibility and a keen interest to learn were also seen as desirable qualities. There was also a suggestion that more diversity in providers would be welcome and support the provision of courses to a wider range of couples.
- The conference discussion groups suggested three leading areas of content that were considered essential: Coping strategies and skills; spiritual aspects and helping couples to understand sacramental marriage better; and helping couples to get to know one another better, in particular understanding their differences and potential difficulties.
- Interestingly there was no direct reference to factors that protect and sustain relationships, the impact of parenthood, and interfaith aspects (although the specific content covered within the existing topic areas is often difficult to discern).
- The principle of having a core curriculum to follow was generally positive. Participants also mentioned that the core curriculum needed to be written in a manner that was easily interpretable.
- The principle of a core curriculum was rarely interpreted as meaning a standardised course. Most participants were opposed to having a curriculum that could be overly prescriptive. This flexibility towards meeting specific needs was seen as a key preference.
- There was a general consensus that conference participants saw the value of evaluation, and recognised it as being core to the future success of marriage preparation. However, it is clear that there are no guidelines about standardised measures and the central collation of the data. There is a worrying percentage of courses that were not evaluated at all – 14% of from the couple survey and 4% from the Provider survey.

#### **8.4 Recommendations for the future provision of Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church**

Based on the independent assessment of the evidence presented in this report, this section concludes the study by listing recommendations for the future provision of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church. Central to these recommendations is the desire for marriage preparation to provide the best support possible for marriage. The recommendations are presented under the following headings:



- Recommendations for provider recruitment
- Recommendations for couple recruitment
- Recommendations for course delivery
- Recommendations for course content
- High-level policy recommendations
- Research recommendations.

Each will now be presented in turn.

#### **a) Recommendations for provider recruitment**

1. In order to boost the uptake of courses, and give couples the best support possible for their marriage, the evidence suggests a need for a corresponding increase in providers. Currently, only 22% of providers have been practicing for three years or less, implying a steady but an insubstantial process of recruiting new providers. This is compounded by the seasonal nature of delivery (provider demand differs across the year) and the fact that many providers (if recruited following their own marriage preparation course) are unlikely to be able to deliver the same number of courses per year compared to a longer serving provider. Therefore, if the intention is to increase the number of couples in receipt of marriage preparation, then the increase in the number of providers must occur well beforehand in order for them to be able to deliver more courses.
2. The greater proportion of providers delivering courses for seven years or more suggests a need for new recruits. However, without an improved question in the survey (see Research recommendations) it is not possible to make a definitive recommendation to increase the number of providers. This is in light of the existing course satisfaction; that the longer serving providers deliver more courses; and that they have undergone more training than the newer recruits.
3. Recommendations to increase the recruitment of marriage preparation providers are:
  - Strategies to provide the offer (i.e. following up the interest from the evaluation form);
  - Give potential providers an insight into roles; and

- Maintain regular contact with couples to ensure that those interested would have the opportunity to express this, even if it was not apparent shortly after their own experience of marriage preparation.
4. Direct recommendation is the most likely route of recruitment for new providers. However, this is rather ad hoc and relies on providers' own judgment. This direct recommendation approach may be insufficient to support a substantial increase in new providers. Consequently, it is recommended that a more standardised recruitment strategy is implemented.
  5. The dominance of Marriage Care in training providers implies they may have important learning to share about recruiting providers for marriage preparation. It is recommended that steps are taken to share their experiences.
  6. Supporting providers is key in maintaining course satisfaction as well as in attracting more providers. It is essential that providers are given more training and support (including mentoring and networking) to improve the 'patchy' provision of training at present and continue the positive reception of marriage preparation courses.
  7. Recommendations to increase the inconsistent support at present for providers are:
    - Innovative online resources;
    - Mentoring and supervision (peer support);
    - Events and conferences (national conferences, retreats, etc.); and
    - The establishment of a national network of providers (also seen as an important prerequisite in delivering courses tailored to the needs of the couple).
  8. With the seasonal provision of marriage preparation, a more coordinated approach could see courses spread more evenly throughout the year, especially if the *minimum* time between the course and marriage was the recommended three months. This would facilitate the recruitment of providers as they would not be expected to deliver courses intensively over a short period and may also increase the feasibility of offering slightly longer courses to couples.
  9. There is also a recommendation to recruit a more diverse range of providers to attract a greater variety of couples to marriage preparation.

## **b) Recommendations for couple recruitment**

1. Recommendations to recruit more couples to marriage preparation need to consider both the spread (actual numbers enrolled) and breadth (preparation time including follow-up) of provision.
2. Recommendations to boost couple uptake are:
  - More integrated support (from clergy and staff within the Parish) generated from improved communication of the benefits of marriage preparation;
  - Offer innovative support options (e.g. online, school-based interventions) especially for younger people;
  - Regular prayer for those approaching marriage and newly-weds; and
  - Provision of ongoing and follow-up support (e.g. email newsletters, anniversary cards, Christmas cards, reunions, booster sessions, etc).
3. The broader, longer-term offer of marriage preparation could be perceived as a more attractive proposition to couples compared to the current one or two day course. Ideas to broaden the offer were: improved forward planning to assess interest and raise awareness of follow-up; follow-up meetings; regular contact such as email newsletters, anniversary cards and Christmas cards; reunions; mentoring schemes to facilitate ongoing support; liturgies; and Prayer. Allowing couples to implement the advice (e.g. through 'home-working') could also increase the 'dosage' outside of the formal contact time with the preparation provider.
4. People's expectations of the course need to be raised beforehand as this is linked with positive impact. This could be enhanced by improving couple's knowledge about what to expect beforehand (including some of the longer term offers). More investigation into ways to improve this lower than average rating about what to expect beforehand is recommended.
5. It is worth considering the option of making the courses mandatory as a means of boosting the number of couples prepared. If courses are to be mandatory, there is research evidence to suggest this will not have a detrimental effect on impact compared to a voluntary course.

### **c) Recommendations for course delivery**

1. It is recommended, based on the reviewed literature, that a team approach of delivery is implemented e.g. by a lay person and a Priest. It is not certain as to the extent of this team delivery at present (as data are not available per course - see Research recommendations).
2. Although most programmes appear to be a day or less, the research evidence suggests that longer programmes should be considered – both in the lead up to marriage and beyond marriage in the form of follow-up or ‘refresher’ sessions (especially as the impacts of the course are likely to diminish through time). Options to extend sessions could be ‘home-working’ outside of the face-to-face contact or creating a blended course (a mixture of online and face-to-face delivery). However, it must also be understood that a programme may be perceived as being too long, so there is a need to find out the optimum duration of a course.
3. There is no standardised length of course, which is reflected in the varying amount of content delivered. The evaluation data are not available to assess satisfaction against course length (see Research Recommendations). The idea of a standard length of course should be considered, although it should also maintain the option of being flexible to suit the needs of couples.
4. With more couples cohabiting before marriage, there is an argument for marriage preparation to come earlier than the typical three to six months before marriage. Earlier programmes (at least three months prior to marriage) should be encouraged given that this is associated with greater satisfaction with the course (compared to those with a shorter interval).
5. In relation to the above point, there is evidence suggesting that even earlier pre-coupling education based on teaching young adults how to choose a spouse wisely is seen as having potential. Also, although perhaps not as relevant for Catholic couples, many couples will cohabit prior to engagement which has become more of a middle stage of a relationship. With the changing stages of relationship formation, earlier education may have a better impact (although couples will be hard to identify prior to their notice of marriage).
6. It is recommended to share the responses people provided about how they see the role of providing Marriage preparation within the broader life and mission of the Church. The five key viewpoints were: Through 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

#### **d) Recommendations for course content**

1. The content of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church 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 transitions, factors protecting and sustaining relationships etc.). It is recommended, therefore, not to substantially overhaul the content delivered in the majority of programmes.
2. However, the wide variety of material delivered in the marriage preparation courses indicates there is no standard content. It is recommended for providers to have more guidance on the essential content to be delivered, in the form of a core curriculum. This would support providers in delivering essential components around the coping skills to sustain and preserve relationship harmony. It may also provide a 'seal of approval' alongside renewed confidence that courses were delivering the expected content.
3. Although the recommendation is for an easily interpretable core curriculum, there were strong preferences among providers that it should not be a standardised course but one that could be adapted and tailored to couples' needs.
4. Additional areas of content that are recommended for consideration are: more acknowledgement that many couples may live together before marriage (also implying marriage preparation should come earlier than the majority time of between three and six months beforehand); the transition to parenthood; maintaining a strong focus on the spiritual aspects of the course and helping couples to understand sacramental marriage better (some comments of dissatisfaction here); increased recognition of inter-faith marriages as these are likely to increase through time; relationship support options (and importance of seeking this early); and relational capability (e.g. understanding of relationships changes and stages, knowing that relationships can improve, etc.).

5. Aside to the provision of information, the courses should allow couples to reflect on the information learnt in 'everyday life'. Theoretical evidence suggests the potential effectiveness of techniques such as Behavioural Modelling Training (BMT; based on Bandura's Social Learning Theory, 1977). BMT uses visual demonstrations of behaviours to promote knowledge acquisition and improvement in attitudes, intentions and self-efficacy. BMT can be used to show the importance of demonstrating and 'unlearning' negative communication styles from others (e.g. via video clips) and replacing with more positive styles of communication (e.g. additional video clips). Practising these skills, and seeking feedback (from self and others) about how these skills are implemented in 'everyday life' is essential.
6. Nonetheless, given the overall satisfaction with the existing courses, the recommendation is to focus more on changes to delivery and recruitment rather than changes in course content. This is based on the assumption that more courses would equate to more couples being equally satisfied (assuming that couples filling out this survey are not disproportionately the most 'satisfied customers').

#### **e) High-level policy recommendations**

1. There is a strong recommendation for an agreed national directive for marriage preparation. This is to replace the more ad hoc, varied means of couple and provider recruitment, course delivery and course content.
2. In relation, there is a further strong recommendation to enhance the communication channels between the key personnel – Bishops, Priests, Providers, etc. to ensure that all are aware about the developments in marriage preparation. The Bishop to Priest communication was seen as the most crucial as the Bishops need to support the Priests in referring couples to marriage preparation. Providers also need the backing of the Priests as part of this referral process.
3. It is recommended to promote conference events and consider the creation of a designated post or role at the Diocese level to support this greater integration of personnel.
4. Enhancing the evaluation (see Research Recommendations) and translating this evidence of effectiveness to all personnel would encourage Bishops and Priests to refer more couples to marriage preparation.

## **f) Research recommendations**

It must be acknowledged at the outset that the survey samples are self-selecting (i.e. survey completion was optional) and limited in their coverage compared to the actual numbers of couples and providers available. It is recommended to extend the evaluation evidence in a number of ways, as follows:

1. A need to boost the survey numbers by promoting the survey more widely, using incentives, etc. A boost in the sample size would increase the argument about its representativeness of all those delivering and receiving marriage preparation.
2. It would be ideal, although problematic, to gather evidence from those choosing not to complete the survey. This could be achieved through making evaluation a compulsory part of the course, through incentives, or as a requirement of any follow-up offers. These non-responders may be the more 'dissatisfied customers' and may have several recommendations on how to improve the course.
3. There is a need to collate the different evaluation data recorded after preparation e.g. telephone interviews, feedback forms. At present, there appears to be no central repository for these data.
4. More course-specific questions in the survey would allow important variations in satisfaction according to: precise course content (aspects of the course that are most/least effective which could inform the core curriculum); type and number of provider(s) on the course; provider length of service; course length; etc. At present the data are only available according to town/city, which cannot be linked to a specific course and so elements of good practice are not able to be identified.
5. There is a recommendation to improve the questions in the surveys. For example, ensuring response options are mutually exclusive; increasing response categories in important areas such as length of service of providers (to have a wider range of length of service bands and a record of providers' age which may give a better indication of impending retirement); and more detail about what was included in the topics covered.

6. Longer follow-up to see the impacts of marriage preparation is recommended. This could include impacts of marriage preparation on divorce, relationship quality, impact of transition to parenthood, for example. This is particularly applicable given that most courses were delivered between one and six months prior to marriage and most people completing the survey were not yet married. This follow-up would also reduce the 'ceiling effect' of expected general satisfaction in the time leading to marriage at course completion.
7. Improved evaluation designs need to be considered. For example, the random allocation of couples to receive different types of marriage preparation to see which types of delivery (e.g. online versus face-to-face) and content are more effective.
8. More research among prospective couples for marriage preparation could help work out what would increase their interest from the range of offers under consideration. For example, follow-up sessions, length of course, delivery options etc. Although a number of suggestions have been raised about increasing couple recruitment, these should be trialled beforehand to assess their potential impact. Moreover, consultation with couples is essential.
9. A systematic review of the research evidence of marriage preparation (more so than in this study) with greater attention to those courses in the Catholic Community would provide essential learning for course delivery and content.

This evaluation evidence would be essential in demonstrating the value of the course, identifying areas of future refinement or further investigation, and to convey the benefits of marriage preparation to the Bishops and Priests who are so central to the course provision. Moreover, further research is required to assess the implementation of some of the recommendations posted in this final chapter. For example, the wide ranging suggestions for improving the recruitment of providers and couples need to be trialled, perhaps on a smaller scale, to see if they justify a more universal implementation.



## **8.5 Final comment**

A vast amount of evaluation data has been reviewed in this report. With the main aim of providing the best support possible for marriage it appears, on the whole, that marriage preparation is seen as a positive experience. This demonstrates the valuable role of the providers, the delivery, and content included in the course. There are, however, a number of areas that are in need of further investigation – especially in relation to boosting the recruitment of providers and couples. A recurring theme emerging from the data is the need for a more integrated, standardised style of course provision. There is notable variation in course delivery, content, routes for provider and couple recruitment, and course evaluation. For these variations to be addressed, a greater understanding of how marriage preparation is implemented is an important step. This report has contributed substantially towards this process.

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## **Appendix 1 – List of publications from Creighton University**

**"BRIDGES" (Building Relationship Interaction, Decision-making, Growth and Enrichment through Spirituality).** A research-based program to help couples identify their strengths and weaknesses around spirituality and religion and move toward building a deeper, more enjoyable bond.

**"TIME, SEX, AND MONEY: THE FIRST FIVE YEARS OF MARRIAGE" (2000).** Center for Marriage and Family, Creighton University. This national study provides a profile of couples married five years or less and reports on a wide range of behaviors, attitudes, experiences, as well as marital adjustment, religiosity, and problematic issues relevant to the early years of marriage. Data included in this study are useful to both married couples and practitioners who work with them.

**"PROBLEMATIC ISSUES IN THE EARLY YEARS OF MARRIAGE: CONTENT FOR PREMARITAL EDUCATION" (2003).** Gail S. Risch, Lisa A. Riley, and Michael G. Lawler. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*. 31:253-269 Presents findings about problematic issues from a national study of couples married five years or less. It argues that the top 10 issues identified as problematic by this study suggest key content areas for premarital education and makes suggestions for both program development and existing program evaluation. The top three issues reported by this sample are balancing job and family, frequency of sexual relations, and financial issues. For each of the 10 issues, comparisons by gender, parental status, cohabitation status, and age are also reported.

**"SEXUALITY EDUCATION AND THE CATHOLIC TEENAGER: A REPORT" (2003).** Gail S. Risch and Michael G. Lawler. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Theory and Practice*. 7:53-74 Reports on and discusses findings from a study of sexuality education in a Catholic diocese. Findings include data about students' knowledge of sexuality, their understanding of Catholic Church teaching about sexuality, their attitudes and values in regard to sexuality, who and what influences their attitudes and values, their sexual behaviors, and their experience of sexuality education. Offers recommendations for parents and formal sexuality education programs.

**"MARRIAGE PREPARATION AND ENRICHMENT" (2002).** Michael G. Lawler and Gail S. Risch. *The Priest* 58: 34-36. Discusses both pre-marital preparation and post-marital enrichment and argues that effective and appropriate pre-marital education and post-marital enrichment are the best approaches for the Church's ministers to be truly helpful to couples.

**"THE FIRST FIVE YEARS OF MARRIAGE: PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES FOR MINISTRY".** (2001) Gail S. Risch and Michael G. Lawler. *Family Ministry: Empowering Through Faith*. 15: 22-28. Discusses ministerial implications of selected findings of a national study of couples married five years or less. Describes programs and resources that couples indicated they had and would use if available.

**"TIME, SEX, AND MONEY: THE FIRST FIVE YEARS OF MARRIAGE."** (2001) Michael G. Lawler and Gail S. Risch. *America* 184: 20-21. Presents a brief discussion of selected findings, problematic areas and marital adjustment, of a national study of couples married five years or less. Points toward pastoral implications.

**"MARITAL SATISFACTION AND RELIGIOUS HETEROGAMY: A COMPARISON OF INTERCHURCH AND SAME-CHURCH INDIVIDUALS"** 2003. Lee M. Williams and Michael G. Lawler. *Journal of Family Issues* 24:1070-1092. Discusses the correlation of marital satisfaction and mixed religiosity in both interchurch and same-church individuals.

**"RELIGIOUS HETEROGAMY AND RELIGIOSITY: A COMPARISON OF INTERCHURCH AND SAME-CHURCH INDIVIDUALS"** (2001). Lee M. Williams and Michael G. Lawler. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40: 465-478. Compares same-church and interchurch respondents on a number of religious variables, including strength of denominational identity, church attendance, drift from church practice, and emphasis on religion in raising children. Interchurch respondents reported lower levels of religiosity than same-church respondents.

**"PREMARITAL COUNSELING WITH INTERCHURCH COUPLES: CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS FORM RECENT RESEARCH"** (2002). Lee M. Williams. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy* 1:45-64. Discusses clinical implications for premarital counseling with interchurch couples and how religion can potentially impact all couples regardless of their denominational affiliation.

**"THE CHALLENGES AND REWARDS OF INTERCHURCH MARRIAGES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY"** (2000). Lee M. Williams and Michael G. Lawler. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 19:205-218. A qualitative study was conducted to understand why couples who belong to different churches (interchurch marriages) are more at risk for marital difficulties than couples belonging to the same church. This article identifies challenges faced by couples in interchurch marriages, strategies used to address their particular challenges, and rewards they experienced as a result of their interchurch marriage.

**"MINISTRY TO INTERCHURCH MARRIAGES: A NATIONAL STUDY"** (1999). Center for Marriage and Family, Creighton University. This national, ecumenical study explores the relationship between religion and marriage, both interchurch and same-church, and the differences and similarities between interchurch and same-church marriages. It provides an in-depth examination of religiosity, looks at the experiences of church among interchurch and same-church individuals, reports on change of religious affiliation, analyzes marital stability and satisfaction, and deals with parenting and family of origin issues. The findings offered in this study point toward strategies to help interchurch couples, and all married couples, build successful marital and religious lives.

**"CHURCH EXPERIENCE OF INTERCHURCH AND SAME-CHURCH COUPLES"** (1999). Michael G. Lawler, Gail S. Risch, and Lisa A. Riley. *Family Ministry* 13:36-46. This article discusses findings from a national ecumenical study of same-church and interchurch marriages. An important conclusion is that individuals in interchurch and same-church relationships have different experiences of church. On average, interchurch respondents had lower scores than same-church respondents for church attendance, denominational identity, and sense of belonging to a local church. Less than half of interchurch respondents reported they were very satisfied with clergy, compared to almost two-thirds of same-church respondents. Fewer interchurch than same-church respondents who had marriage preparation found it helpful. These findings provide essential information that can assist both clergy and congregations as they minister to interchurch couples.

**"COVENANT GENERATIVITY: TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN FAMILY"** (1999). Michael G. Lawler and Gail S. Risch. *Horizons* 26:7-30. This article is an effort toward practical, pastoral, theological correlation, an effort to bring together the American cultural tradition and the Christian theological tradition. Its argument develops in four cumulative theses: 1) there is a crisis of family in the United States today; 2) what is said of the family in both First and Second biblical Testaments is of no direct help in that crisis; 3) what makes a family Christian is not the slavish following of some biblical saying about family but the following of Jesus confessed as the Christ; 4) the Christian family has an important contribution to make in the contemporary crisis of family in the United States.

**"AN EMPIRICAL APPROACH TO DESIGNING MARRIAGE PREPARATION PROGRAMS"**(1999). Lee M. Williams, Lisa A. Riley, Gail S. Risch, and David T. van Dyke. *American Journal of Family Therapy* 27:271-283. Individuals married 1-8 years were surveyed to assess their perceptions of the helpfulness of marriage preparation and specific aspects of their experience. Two-thirds of the respondents perceived marriage preparation as a valuable experience, but the perceived value

declined with the length of marriage. Aspects of marriage preparation rated most helpful included providing time for couples to learn about each other, using a team of providers, addressing the Five C's (communication, commitment, conflict resolution, children, and church), and having 8-9 sessions.

**"INTERCHURCH COUPLES: THE ISSUE OF ACCEPTANCE"** (1998). Lee M. Williams and Michael G. Lawler. *Pastoral Psychology* 47:33-47. This article, based on a qualitative study, explores ways in which interchurch couples struggle to gain acceptance. It discusses attitudes and factors related to level of acceptance and strategies that interchurch couples utilize to deal with lack of acceptance.

**"MARRIAGE PREPARATION IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: GETTING IT RIGHT"** (1995). Center for Marriage and Family, Creighton University. This national study examines the impact of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church. It found that marriage preparation was rated as a valuable experience by the vast majority of those who participated in it; marriage preparation has a restricted shelf life; the mandatory nature of marriage preparation does not get in the way of couples valuing it highly; it was perceived as most valued when presented by a team of clergy and lay leaders; the intensity of a program impacts its evaluation-too few and too many sessions limit its value; rated most helpful were the 5 C's: communication, commitment, conflict-resolution, children, and church; attitudes toward marriage preparation are coloured by a sense of belonging to and participation in church practice; inter-church couples come to marriage preparation with lower levels of church involvement and lower expectations of the program and are more likely than sane-church couples to drift from church belonging and practice.