

# **Marriage Guidance Counselling**

**Mrs. C. W. M. Argent**

There are many areas of human suffering not relieved by the Welfare State. In no area is the need for help as great as in that of human relationships, and especially the marriage relationship. Stable marriages, and homes in which children can be reared in love and security, are the basis of a good social structure in any community. Many couples find themselves in difficulties—in some cases brought upon themselves, and in others right 'out of the blue'—and do not know where to turn for help. It was the recognition of this need for 'somewhere to turn' that brought to birth the National Marriage Guidance Council, who seek to provide centres in various cities and towns where skilled, kindly, and highly-trained men and women are available to offer the needed help.

The choosing of candidates for marriage counselling is most carefully done. The candidate is first interviewed locally and if the interviewing committee think him suitable, the local Marriage Guidance Council sponsors him to the National Council, which calls him to a residential Selection Conference. Here, in company with some fifteen or so other candidates, he will live for two or three days. He will be interviewed separately by each of the five or six selectors, one of whom will be a psychiatrist, and all the others will be people experienced in counselling methods. Discussion groups are held, with the selectors observing those taking part. After the candidates have departed, the selectors get together and come to a unanimous decision about each one. Successful candidates, about 40-50% of those sponsored, are told they have been selected for training. Four residential periods of training are spread over a year or so, and after each period of training, written papers must be submitted. Then follows a year's probationary work under the guidance of more experienced counsellors, and then an assessment is made by a representative from Headquarters.

Marriage counselling is not giving direct advice. This is perhaps not easy to understand for those whose evangelistic efforts often sound like 'Do this—or else!' Counsellors are selected, not particularly for academic qualifications, but rather for qualities of personality and character. They are people of strong convictions, but with sufficient humility not to impose them on others. They must be able to listen, without interruption, without showing any sign of shock, without judging, or offering ready-made solutions. Over a period of time, and during several interviews, the counsellor is able to help the troubled person to come to a better understanding of himself, his partner, and thus the marriage. Counsellors must recognise their own limitations, and know when it is necessary to pass people on to consultants for specialised help.

Some years of counselling experience showed that many difficulties could have been avoided if people had had a better understanding of marriage before they began. This led to questioning as to whether something could be done to help young people in their formative years to understand the responsibility that goes with adulthood. Many young people in the top forms of our schools have a good deal of factual knowledge, but need someone to help them to relate that knowledge to the emotional upsurgings of adolescence. Many parents cannot help, willing though they may be, and it became more and more apparent that valuable work could be done in this field by people of the right personal quality. Today, 'education counsellors', carefully selected and trained, are welcomed by some Local Education Authorities into grammar and secondary modern schools, to talk with small groups of girls and boys in the top forms. These are not occasions for preaching, or for laying down laws, but for frank and open discussion, in which girls and boys can air their views and opinions about personal relationships, about marriage, about the whole perplexing business of becoming adult. The great need is for communication. This need is evident at all levels, but particularly with young people, who by this means can learn much from each other, as under skilled leadership they are able to discover for themselves their own moral standards. Today, at a very early age, pre-marital sexual experience is taken for granted by many young people, and most of the mass media, for which the adult world is responsible, seem to endorse this view. It is surely a healthy thing that mature, informed, happily married and highly trained men and women should have the opportunity of guiding the thoughts of such young people. By means of these frank and informal discussions characters are being steadied, and values established in the minds of young people which will stand by them as they move into the adult world of business, or factory, or university.

Many of our own Assembly young people, brought up in happy, sheltered Christian homes—surely the best background—could well profit by such discussion groups. Just as one's faith becomes valid only when one appropriates it for oneself, instead of giving a mental assent to what someone else teaches, so one's convictions about morals and behaviour, marriage and family life, must be hammered out for oneself. It has been a disturbing experience for many to leave home, and go out into college or university life, to find that values accepted at home are here questioned or even openly scorned, and the surest armour is *knowledge*. There are trained workers in most Marriage Guidance Councils who would be happy to give help in such groups, particularly in the atmosphere of our Youth Clubs and Young People's Fellowships.

Marriage Guidance is not a field for evangelism, but it is a way of expressing one's faith in terms of service to disturbed and perplexed people. Many Councils need all kinds of help. As well as counsellors and educational workers, many centres need part-time secretaries, appointments secretaries, receptionists and money-raisers.

I read somewhere recently: 'Compassion alone is reason enough to

become involved in relieving human suffering, and we may not excuse ourselves from involvement because we cannot see much advantage to be gained for the Kingdom'.

## APPENDIX

The General Principles and Aims of the National Marriage Guidance Council, reworded in 1952, are accepted by every Marriage Guidance Council in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

### Principles

- 1 Successful marriage, the foundation of happy family life, is vital to the well-being of society.
- 2 Marriage should be entered upon as a partnership for life, with reverence and a sense of responsibility.
- 3 Spiritual, emotional and physical harmony in marriage is only achieved by unselfish love and self-discipline.
- 4 Children are the natural fulfilment of marriage and enrich the relationship between husband and wife; nevertheless, scientific contraception, when used according to conscience within marriage, can contribute to the health and happiness of the whole family.
- 5 The right basis for personal and social life is that sexual intercourse should take place only within marriage.

### Aims

- 6 To enlist, through a national system of selection and training, the services of men and women qualified for the work of reconciliation and education in marriage and family life.
- 7 To help parents and others to give children an appreciation of family life; and to make available to young men and women before marriage such guidance as may promote right relationships in friendship, courtship, marriage and parenthood.
- 8 To assist those who are about to marry to understand the nature, responsibilities and rewards of the married state.
- 9 To offer counsel to those who encounter difficulties in the way of married happiness, if possible before these difficulties become serious.
- 10 To work towards a state of society in which the welfare of the family shall receive primary consideration, and parenthood shall nowhere involve unreasonable social and economic disabilities.