

MARRIAGE

TIME TO GRASP OPPORTUNITIES



The first of two papers that are based on presentations made by Revd Andrew Body to Mothers' Union supporters in the Diocese of Winchester in 2008. Revd Body is a parish priest in Guildford Diocese, and a respected author of three books on marriage whose work has involved a symbiotic relationship with Mothers' Union. His book 'Growing Together' is a guide for couples getting married, which is now also available as a workbook for marriage preparation sessions.

How many Marriages were there in England in 2005?

(in the last Church statistical report)

- 215,000
- 245,000 **YES** (and going down)
- 295,000
- 315,000

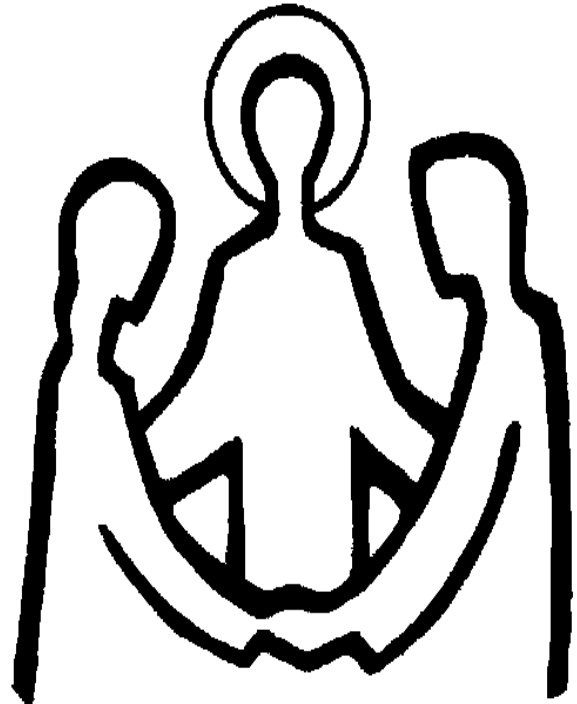
How many of these were in a Christian Church?

- 45,000
- 60,000 **YES** (and going down)
- 80,000
- 100,000

How many of these were in Winchester Diocese?

- 1,410
- 1,810 **YES** (and going down)
- 2,200
- 2,600

Given the fact that our population is over 60 million how many people attend a Church or Chapel Wedding in any given year? 25 million!



Research in marriage has been carried out by several bodies, including the University of Surrey, Henley Headlight (a survey organisation used extensively by Government), FLAME and others. Using the findings of this research there are many mixed messages from the general population about their feelings on marriage and church wedding services. Although 50% of couples planning their wedding would like a church service they felt 'they were not religious enough to approach the church.' Those that did 'got a better welcome than they expected'. Twenty five million people attending church weddings is an opportunity that should be grasped more fully, but these opportunities have to be grasped in the right way.

First impressions for the guests on the day are important!

Although the following scenario is drawn from real life, it did not all happen at one wedding(!):

"The wedding starts at 2.00pm, at 1:40pm the church is locked and guests are waiting outside, in the rain. The vergers arrives, his first job is to set up a board outside saying 'no confetti, no photographs, no videos'. On entering the unheated church they are given bedraggled service sheets and told to share hymn books!"

The atmosphere must be right – flowers, music, welcoming vergers and many other things help to make each individual wedding special and show that the church cares.

Getting the service right – The Henley research highlighted the importance of dignity and gravitas not 'mateyness'

Getting the preaching right – it is important to share the Gospels.

The opportunities with each couple are also important. Popular seasons for weddings (like prior to Christmas) can be restricted when Churches place more emphasis on the Church calendar than on the joy of marriage. Couples should be drawn into a sense of belonging to the church as they are offered both marriage preparation and wedding preparation. Although most parishes do one or both of these through their clergy team this does not have to be the case. Mothers' Union members may be ideally suited to assisting or carrying out these duties. Couples should be given choices (hymns, readings, prayers, etc) which show there is no 'right way' to perform a wedding, and allow them to personalise their own service. The church needs to work hard not to abandon couples after all the preparation and the actual wedding service, showing instead that Christians remain interested in their lives and welfare.



Easter Saturday Weddings may be liturgically unusual but they are not impossible, if timed carefully. This 2004 example from St. Peter's, Yateley was for a local couple who were encouraged to understand the significance of the crosses, drape, lilies and crown of thorns, with the result that their afternoon wedding had a beautiful setting which did not conflict with the pattern of Easter services.

There are also opportunities within the community, with many more venues now licensed to conduct marriage ceremonies, making the church just one of the places available in a marketplace where couples are the 'customers'. So churches need to compete for the large volume of potential customers by supplying not just a venue for the service but a high level of customer service as well. Where some church buildings are not as suitable for wedding services, Andrew cited the example of neighbouring church to his own, which doesn't have a central aisle, who (with his agreement) use his church when it is felt to be more suitable.

There can be benefits to the church - after all the wedding fees can remove pressure on the parish needing to fund raise to survive! But most importantly, reaching out to couples, making it a wonderful experience all the way through and after the service, may encourage the couple or their guests to become committed to church life, albeit not necessarily in the church that conducted the service. It is therefore important for couples who move away geographically after the marriage to be recommended to the church in their new parish.

Books by Revd Andrew Body:

Growing Together

is for couples preparing for marriage and was written with the help of Mothers' Union in Guildford Diocese. It is also available as a course with a CD of resources.

Pocket Prayers for Marriage

is an anthology of prayers, some from Mothers' Union members and some composed by Andrew. These are all available through Christian Bookshops or at www.eden.co.uk

A range of books and cards for weddings is available at the Mothers' Union online giftshop: www.shop.muenterprises.co.uk