

# Reconciliation and Couples on the Brink

## Opportunities and Challenges

### PROCEEDINGS

### Roundtable #3



Convened by the  
Marriage Resource Centre

For PMRC (Australia)

Friday August 12th 2011 | Sydney

# From the Convenors

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Marriage is fundamentally important to the mission of the Catholic Church. By it life is procreated through the interpersonal communion of spouses.

Within it future generations are nurtured in faith and in virtue. Through it the Trinitarian reality is proclaimed to the world. On it the Church depends for the seeding of new vocations to the priesthood, religious and married life.

Without the solid bedrock of marriage, everything about the Church becomes harder - harder to profess, harder to initiate, harder to sustain. On the other hand, when marriages flourish, so also does the life of the Church community.

Yet marriage seems to be in free fall these days. Divorce reform has undermined the permanency of marriage.

The 'mindsets' associated with contraceptive practices has established a culture of sexual promiscuity and infidelity.

Children are no longer viewed as the supreme gift of marriage but as a financial burden and lifestyle liability. Surrogate 'marital' relationships are given equal legal status and are so plentiful that the general public no longer knows what marriage really is.

In the midst of such challenges, the Church has wisely held firm to the truth about marriage and boldly continues to proclaim it.

Among the many wise supporters of an authentic understanding of marriage are those who work at the 'pointy end of marriage': helping couples on the brink of divorce. These vulnerable families

need and deserve the very best the Church has to offer.

They deserve both compassion and truth; a pastorally sensitive, theologically informed and effective response. We salute the many devoted counsellors who give so generously and with great commitment to their work.

The Marriage Resource Centre, a key activity of PMRC Australia, has facilitated a number of ad hoc 'roundtable' discussions bringing together relevant experts to explore aspects of Catholic Marriage.

In August 2011 we convened our third roundtable to address issues facing Catholic marriage counselling.

Building on the previous roundtable which also focused on this topic, we were delighted at the opportunity to have well-known family therapist, Dr Bill Doherty, 'anchor' this discussion while he was visiting Australia.

It is with pleasure that we present these Proceedings on Reconciliation and Couples on the Brink, attended by dedicated experts from a variety of fields including psychotherapy, counselling, education, public policy, canon law, medicine and marriage formation.

In doing so we wish to extend our gratitude to the participants and pray for the success of their endeavours.

*Francine and Byron Pirola*  
*Convenors*

# Context

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PMRC (Australia), through its Marriage Resource Centre, has been convening ad hoc roundtables aimed at exploring aspects of Catholic Marriage. This third roundtable was convened in August 2011 to address reconciliation opportunities with couples in crisis.

In particular, this roundtable explored in detail Dr Bill Doherty's ground-breaking work as outlined in his published article 'Reconciliation with Couples on the Brink'. The session provided an invaluable first-hand understanding of Doherty's framework from which we hope the participants will be able to amplify the effectiveness of their various agencies and practices.

The format of the roundtable involved a 45 minute input from Dr Doherty, followed by a short intervention/response from each participant and concluding with open conversation.

The objective of this roundtable was to examine aspects of Dr Doherty's approach to reconciling couples in the process of divorce and explore the implication of these insights for Catholic counselling services and broader approaches to Catholic marriages under stress.

The Participants included:

- **Michael and Tricia Casey**, Parish & Marriage Resource Centre (PMRC)
- **Marie Claire Cheron-Sauer**, Manager, Counselling Services – CatholicCare, Archdiocese of Sydney
- **Jennifer Edwards**, Family and Relationship Psychologist - CatholicCare, Diocese of Parramatta
- **Otto Henfling**, Executive Director - Centacare Catholic Social Services Parramatta
- **Peter Holmes**, Lecturer in Theology, University of Notre Dame Australia, Sydney
- **Kristina Keneally**, Member (for Heffron) of the NSW Legislative Assembly
- **James McDonald**, Manager of Studies – Catholic Adult Education Centre
- **Ann O'Brien**, Senior Manager, Centacare Catholic Social Services, Diocese of Parramatta
- **Byron and Francine Pirola** (convenors)
- **John Poon**, Psychologist, private practitioner
- **Frances Rix**, Family Centre Manager - CatholicCare, Diocese of Broken Bay
- **Sandra Lynch**, Associate Professor - School of Philosophy & Theology, and Director – Centre for Faith, Ethics and Society, University of Notre Dame

Dr Doherty's input is best summarised in the attached paper. The reflections' of a number of participants has also been tabled.

Reconciliation & Couples on the Brink | Roundtable Discussion – Marriage Resource Centre | August 12, 2011

Dr Bill Doherty (Anchor)



### **Director – Citizen Professional Center, University of Minnesota**

William J. Doherty, Ph.D., is Professor and Director of the Citizen Professional Center, University of Minnesota. He has been a researcher, teacher, and practitioner of family studies and therapy for more than 30 years, and in recent years has developed the Families and Democracy Project to engage communities in solving social problems.

He currently directs the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project at the University of Minnesota. He is past President of the National Council on Family Relations, the oldest interdisciplinary family studies organisation in the United States.

**Family Social Science  
UMN Twin Cities**

**Website: <http://www.drbilldoherty.org/>**

## **Interest in Marital Reconciliation Among Divorcing Parents**

William J. Doherty, Brian J. Willoughby, and Bruce Peterson

### **Abstract**

This study offers the first research data on the interest of divorcing parents in marital reconciliation. A sample of 2,484 divorcing parents was surveyed after taking required parenting classes. They were asked about whether they believed their marriage could still be saved with hard work, and about their interest in reconciliation services. About 1 in 4 individual parents indicated some belief that their marriage could still be saved, and in about 1 in 9 matched couples both partners did. As for interest in reconciliation services, about 3 in 10 individuals indicated potential interest. In a sub-sample of 329 matched couples, about 1 in 3 couples had one partner interested but not the other, and in 1 in 10 couples both partners were interested in reconciliation services. Findings were consistent across most demographic and marital factors. The only strong predictors of reconciliation interest were gender, with males being more interested than females, and initiator status, with far greater interest among those whose partner initiated the divorce. These findings are discussed in terms of attachment theory and future prospects of divorce services.

**See Appendix for The Washington Post article on “Delaying divorce to save marriages: The Second Chances Act” – October 20, 2011**

## Discernment Counseling for Couples Considering Divorce

William Doherty and Steven Harris, University of Minnesota  
[www.mncouplesonthebrink.org](http://www.mncouplesonthebrink.org)

### Context of Therapy with Couples Considering Divorce

The material in this workshop applies to couples who have made a life-long commitment, that is, couples who are married legally or functionally and where one or both are considering divorce.

In most cases, one spouse does not want the divorce while the other is seriously considering it. These “mixed agenda” couples (one leaning out, the other leaning in) are an important subset (an estimated 30% of couples presenting for couples therapy).

Most therapists lack an explicit model or protocol for working with couples in the crisis of the divorce decision. We are each left to make one up on our own.

Our models of couples therapy assume that both people have signed up to do therapy for their marriage, as opposed to having one foot out the door and uncertain about whether to do therapy.

Most therapists seem to assume that when someone files for divorce, it's time to give up on the marriage and start divorce counseling or mediation.

When someone decides to move forward on the divorce and then shows ambivalence, many counselors and lawyers assume that the person is showing anxiety about what they really need to do.

Conclusion: We lack tailored services for a common, high risk group of couples.

### Research

#### Background to the research

The study: A survey of nearly 2,500 divorcing parents in Hennepin County, Minnesota found that about 3 in 10 individuals thought their marriage could still be saved with hard work and indicated potential interest in reconciliation services. This included 1 in 10 matched couples where both parties were interested and another 30% where one is interested and the other is not. *Ref: Doherty, W. J., Willoughby, B. J., & Peterson, B. (2010). Interest in reconciliation among divorcing parents. Family Court Review, 49, 313-321.*

New data on attitudes towards the divorce from over 1,200 divorcing individual parents (from parenting classes N = 804), mailed surveys right after filing (N = 296), and collaborative lawyers' offices (N = 113).

## Attitude typology

- a. I'm done with this marriage; it's too late now even if my spouse were to make major changes. (66%)
- b. I have mixed feelings about the divorce; sometimes I think it's a good idea and sometimes I'm not sure. (17%)
- c. I would consider reconciling if my spouse got serious about making major changes. (9%)
- d. I don't want this divorce, and I would work hard get us back together. (8%)

Among the lawyers' clients at intake, almost half were in b, c, or d. The results above indicate (only a third in b, c or d) that early intervention potentially yields a greater number of couples prepared to consider reconciliation.

## Projects Coming Out of the Research

1. The Marital Law Marital Reconciliation Option Project
  - Goal: collaborative lawyers opening up the reconciliation option in family law through developing best practices and training lawyers and other divorce professionals.
  - Training lawyers to use the attitude typology at intake, engage in a conversation to open up the reconciliation option, and refer to Discernment Counseling if clients are interested.
  
2. The Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project
  - Funded by the State of Minnesota through a surcharge in the marriage license fee.
  - Goal: to enhance the capacity of professionals to help couples on the brink of divorce who are interested in exploring the option of reconciliation.
  - Developing and evaluating Discernment Counseling as a modality.
  - Training lawyers, therapists, and clergy.

## Common Mistakes with Mixed Agenda Couples: Why We Need a New Approach

1. Pursuing the Distancer
2. Siding with the Distancer by Not Offering Hope
3. Only Working Conjointly

# Discernment Counseling

## Overview

The goal of discernment counseling is to help couples achieve greater clarity and confidence in their decision-making about divorcing.

The immediate decision is framed not as whether to divorce or stay married forever but whether to continue moving towards divorce or committing to a six month all-out effort to restore the marriage, with divorce off the table for that time period.

A clear distinction is made between discernment counseling and change-oriented marital therapy.

Discernment counseling involves 1-5 sessions working with the couple together and each partner separately. The first session is two hours and the subsequent ones 1.5 or 2 hours.

After establishing, via separate phone calls, where each partner is on the divorce decision and interest in discernment counseling, and doing a domestic violence and coercion screen, the first session begins by exploring three narratives: the divorce narrative (what has gone wrong); the repair narrative (how they have tried to fix things); and a possible reconciliation narrative (six months of all-out effort to see if the marriage can be healthy and good for both of them).

The specifics of the reconciliation narrative are usually explored with each partner individually, since their attitudes towards potential reconciliation generally differ greatly at the outset.

The discernment counselor explores these narratives in order to help the couple see their journey in a more complex way and to see what options then become most compelling. The emphasis is on self-differentiation and self-responsibility and how growing in these areas can contribute to a relationship decision. The counselor respects the reasons for divorce while trying to open up the possibility of restoring the marriage to health. The counselor offers support and understanding along with challenges to narratives that lead to hopelessness, but does not

make therapeutic interventions aimed at improving the marriage.

When one spouse wants to stay married and the other is leaning out, the discernment counselor works with the couple together and each partner separately. With the leaning-out partner, the focus is on a decision about whether to divorce now or enter a six month reconciliation period with couples therapy and other help to see if the marriage can become good for both partners.

For the leaning-in partner, the focus is on self-learning and constructive efforts to salvage the marriage. (We ask this spouse to read Michele Weiner-Davis's book *The Divorce Remedy*.) In both cases, the emphasis is on understanding one's own role in the problems and potential solutions, rather than focusing on changing the other.

If the ultimate decision is to try to reconcile, the discernment counselor switches from discernment counseling to beginning a six month course of couples' therapy and making referrals to additional resources in the community as needed.

The idea is that there is a specific agenda and plan in place before the reconciliation phase begins.

If the ultimate decision is to divorce, the discernment counselor helps the couple connect with lawyers and other divorce professionals who will support them in having a constructive, collaborative divorce. When couples decide to divorce, discernment counseling aims to foster a healthy emotional divorce for the sake of everyone involved.

## Structure of Sessions

A key element in this process is to work mainly with spouses separately and to carefully orchestrate the couple conversations at the beginning and end of sessions.

First session: about 40 minutes conjointly to hear their answers to the three narrative questions and get a sense of their couple dynamics, then 30 minutes with the leaning-out partner and 30 minutes with the leaning-in partner, ending with a summary from each about what they are taking from the session (coached in advance by the discernment counselor), and the counselor's view of their situation and sense of how further discernment counseling sessions might be helpful.

Subsequent sessions: brief check-in with couple together (any major developments since last

session and the frame of mind of each about working on the marriage versus divorcing), followed by separate conversations and ending with a check-out similar to the first session.

This process continues until there is a decision on whether to divorce, enter the reconciliation phase, or postpone a decision.

The five-session limit adds intensity to the process and keeps it from edging into couples therapy.

If both partners want to start the reconciliation phase, there is a clear shift in the sessions towards conjoint couples therapy, with period evaluations of whether they are making progress during the six month period of reconciliation.

# Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project

## Values Statement

### What we believe about divorce

- Divorce is usually an attempt to solve a problem that people think can't be solved in any other way.
- Some divorces are necessary in order to prevent further harm in a destructive relationship.
- Some divorces are ultimately unavoidable because one party decides on divorce despite the wishes of the other party.
- Some people behave destructively enough over a long time that they lose their claim on their spouse's commitment.
- However, many of today's divorces could be prevented if both parties took steps to work on their marriage before it's too late.

### What we believe about marriage

- Healthy, life-long marriage has unique value for individuals, families and communities.
- Life-long commitment is especially difficult in today's throwaway culture.
- Children have an important stake in the health and endurance of their parents' marriage.
- Unless there is risk and danger, spouses owe each other a careful look at whether their marriage can be restored to health before deciding to divorce.



## What we believe about healing

- Human beings have the capacity to move past anxiety, distrust, and hostility and relate to each other from our highest selves.
- Restoring a marriage must not come at the expense of one of the partners. Love and fairness must go hand in hand.
- Typical marriage counseling available in most communities is not effective enough for many couples on the brink of divorce, especially when they differ on whether to try to save the marriage.
- The key is whether both spouses want to restore the marriage to health. When both spouses devote themselves fully and with proper help to restoring their marriage to health, they can usually make it.
- Healing can also occur through divorce when both partners commit to bringing their best selves to the process.

## References

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Weiner-Davis, M. (2002). *The divorce remedy*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Video: Working With Couples Considering Divorce. William J. Doherty. American Psychological Association Video Series IV: Relationship. <http://www.apa.org/videos/series4.html>

Video: Value Sensitive Therapy. William J. Doherty interviewing a woman having an affair and considering ending her marriage. Available from Psychotherapy.Net. <http://www.psychotherapy.net/video/value-sensitive-therapy>Psychotherapy.Net.

Two-Day Marriage Friendly Therapy Workshop by William J. Doherty: DVDs for 1-2 hour segments available at [www.drbilldoherty.org](http://www.drbilldoherty.org).

# Tricia and Michael Casey

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## **Parish & Marriage Resource Centre (PMRC) Australia**

Tricia and Michael have been married for 30 years and they have three adult children. Tricia has a background in a variety of fields. She is a qualified and experienced teacher; she managed a large general medical practice for more than 10 years, is qualified and experienced in the counselling arena and is a consultant in enabling leadership with integrity. The holder of postgraduate qualifications in counselling from the Institute of Counselling, Sydney, Tricia worked as a counsellor and group work facilitator.

Michael is a medical practitioner and the director of a large medical practice. He is also a lecturer in Medicine at the University of Notre Dame, Sydney. He has a Masters of Theology.

Tricia and Michael are on the National Leadership Team for the PMRC (Parish & Marriage Resource Centre) and have facilitated and trained couples in the PMRC marriage programmes around Australia for more than 15 years.

We have both worked intimately with individuals and couples who are experiencing “being on the brink”. As such, we were both vitally interested in Dr Doherty’s research and recommendations in working with these couples. Of particular interest is the outstanding element of ambivalence which is present in such a significant percentage of couples presenting for the divorce process.

We applaud Dr Doherty’s work on the discernment process. It presents a useful model for counsellors to work with the presenting ambivalence and to use it as an opportunity to explore potential avenues for reconciliation and rebuilding of the marriage relationship.

From a medical and life perspective, there can be an inclination to separate physical and mental from spiritual well-being. If we are people of faith, it is negligent to not offer the “whole of life” approach to any problem. A faith history could take the form of: Do you have a faith? Is it important to you? Do you have a faith community? What activities are you involved in?

In our work in marriage preparation and marriage enrichment, as well as our combined histories as a GP and a counsellor, we see it as essential that the Catholic Church takes leadership in assisting individuals and couples navigate the sometimes rocky pathway of marriage.

The Church holds a unique vision out to couples of marriage as sacrament, with the graces that are embodied in it. If we believe this, then we need to utilise it.

As a church community it is essential that we offer practical support to those experiencing difficulties and who are “on the brink”. It is also critical that we hold out that vision, and engage with couples who wish to have their spiritual life included in the process.

It is with great sadness that we have encountered instances where Catholic couples “on the brink” have gone to a church agency, believing that an understanding of their commitment in the context of their faith will be the basis of any work done, only to find that is not the case. This is an important issue for the Church, clinicians and agencies to wrestle with, as it is so counter-cultural to what is promised in the wider secular world.

# Marie-Claire Cheron-Sauer

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## **Manager, Counselling Services – CatholicCare Sydney**

Marie-Claire is a Social Work graduate from the University of New South Wales with more than 20 years of clinical experience in the areas of substance abuse (alcohol), grief and loss, child, adolescent and family mental health and trauma, working in the New South Wales hospital and community health system and with Australian Defence Force personnel and their families. She has conducted research in the NSW prison system and the TAFE sector in NSW. She holds a Masters in Policy and Research from Macquarie University and a Masters in Management (Leadership) from the University of New South Wales. She has taught at a number of universities from 1994 to 2004 in the areas of social policy, sociology, social research and research in counselling.

Her current substantive position is Manager of Counselling Services, CatholicCare, Sydney, where she has responsibility for a range of counselling programs. She is National Vice President of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), where she holds portfolio responsibility for education and accreditation of social work degree programs and advanced practice through the Australian College of Social Work.

**CatholicCare**

**Polding Centre**

**W:** [www.catholiccare.org](http://www.catholiccare.org)

**No submission tabled.**

# Jennifer Rahme-Edwards

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## **Family and Relationship Psychologist – CatholicCare, Diocese of Parramatta**

For the last six years Jennifer has worked specifically with couples and families within a Christian setting, initially with Anglicare and for the last four years with CatholicCare Parramatta. Prior to this she worked with clients in a variety of community settings encompassing issues of youth homelessness,, drug and alcohol misuse and mental health.

Her main role over the last 14 years with CatholicCare Parramatta has been as a Family and Relationship Psychologist and Group Facilitator. In 2009 she also Co-ordinated the Pre-Marriage Program but resigned before the birth of her second child. Jennifer has been married for four years and has two daughters.

As a family and relationship psychologist I encounter many couples “on the brink” of divorce (both Christian and non-Christian). I have found a foundation in Catholic teachings and beliefs about marriage to be fundamental in the course of action I plan with each couple. As a Catholic, I am privileged to know that marriage is more than just a contract between two people; it is an eternal union of two souls. As such, I encounter not only a possible relationship breakdown but also a spiritual consequence for each individual in the couple if the divorce proceeds.

With this in mind, my goal when I encounter “couples on the brink” is to, in a professional and non-judgemental way, fight for their marriage. Preparation for each session includes a private prayer asking for Our Lady’s intervention during the session and the will of God to be done. My sessions with the couple tends to focus on demystifying assumptions and unconscious expectations of oneself, the other and the relationship; framing couple dialogues towards helping each understand past relationship exchanges and experiences differently, and facilitating an intrapersonal and interpersonal understanding of the blocks in the relationship to a point where the conversation changes from plans for separation to plans for their future together.

I was thankful to be a part of the recent Catholic Counsellors Roundtable as it completed the puzzle for an area in relationship counselling that I been attempting to navigate – that is, how to “fight for a marriage” where one member of the couple has already made the decision to leave. I greatly appreciated Dr Bill Doherty’s method of approach which included specific types of questions to ask the couple initially and, pending the answers to these questions, inviting the couple for individual sessions with a different agenda for each couple. And that “counselling” did not start until a commitment to work on the relationship for a contracted amount of time was established via the individual sessions.

Thank you for this opportunity to learn about another resource that could help keep marriages together.

# Otto Henfling

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## **Executive Director – Centacare Catholic Social Services Parramatta**

Otto is the Executive Director of Centacare Catholic Social Services in the Parramatta Diocese. Prior to that he was a senior manager and member of the executive of CatholicCare Sydney from June 2005. He directed and managed a division responsible for the delivery of vocational, training and support programmes to people of working age with a disability.

Prior to commencing working for faith-based agencies Otto enjoyed a 22-year career in welfare-focused departments of the Australian Public Service in both the western suburbs of Sydney as well as six years in Canberra. He has experience in direct service delivery, policy implementation and development, programme analysis and corporate areas. In 2008 he completed a Diploma of Company Director with the AICD.

W: [www.ccss.org.au](http://www.ccss.org.au)

CatholicCare Social Services – Diocese of Parramatta (CCSS) has a well-respected pre-marriage education course which is well supported by the priests and deacons of the Diocese. We also have a very high-quality relationship counselling programme for those times when marriages hit difficult times. In addition we run the Keeping Kids in Mind (KKIM) programme, developed jointly with the CatholicCare offices in Sydney and Wollongong and Centacare Broken Bay, to work with separating parents to ensure that the best interests of their children are kept at the forefront of their minds. Much of what was shared by Dr Doherty is being tried in our programmes but not necessarily in as a co-ordinated and advanced way as Dr Doherty has developed.

It became apparent to me that programmes to support marriages when they are not in stress – when they are “coasting” – are missing from our repertoire of programmes. If we want to reduce the number of marriages that fail we need to provide opportunities for on-going strengthening and support. Professional people need to regularly undertake professional development courses to maintain their registration or similar. This professional development is not undertaken only when they have proven to be failing in their chosen profession – in fact it is to ensure that they remain current. A similar approach to a couple’s marriage (which, as Catholics, we ought to recognise as more important than our profession) should reduce the number of marriages that require significant remedial counselling.

CatholicCare Parramatta will continue to explore opportunities to provide opportunities for couples to strengthen their marriage and help avoid the need for significant relationship counselling due to breakdown.

# Peter Holmes

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## Lecturer in Theology, University of Notre Dame Australia, Sydney

Peter has studied at Luther Seminary for six years and engaged in pastoral work in Adelaide and Melbourne, serving as a Lutheran minister in Melbourne. He has also worked with Centacare – Catholic Family Services in Melbourne, in the area of marriage education (on an organising committee of Melbourne MARENC in 2001) and served as Executive Secretary of the Council for Marriage and Family in Melbourne.

He has also studied at the JPPI Institute and at Notre Dame University. He spent six years as Manager of Studies at the Catholic Adult Education Centre, Sydney (including involvement in its pre-marriage program). He is now a full time Lecturer in Theology at the University of Notre Dame, Sydney. Peter is also married and the father of seven children.

W: [www.sydney.nd.edu.au](http://www.sydney.nd.edu.au)

**No submission tabled.**

# Kristina Keneally MP

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## **Member for Heffron in the New South Wales Parliament**

Elected in 2003, Kristina has had the privilege of serving the people of New South Wales as a Minister in the portfolios of Ageing, Disability Services, Planning, Infrastructure and Redfern Waterloo. She was also the NSW Government Spokesperson for World Youth Day in 2008.

In 2009 Kristina became the 42nd Premier of New South Wales and the first woman Premier in the state. She holds a BA in Political Science (Hons) and a MA in Religious Studies, and has published several academic and other articles on her area of specialty, feminist theology. She has also worked as the NSW Youth Coordinator for the Society of St Vincent de Paul and taught at a school in a 'teacher shortage area' in rural New Mexico.

She is the mother of three children: Daniel (aged 13), Brendan (aged 11), and Caroline, who was stillborn. Kristina is proud to serve as the Patron of The Stillbirth Foundation, which promotes awareness, understanding, support and research into stillbirth.

**No submission tabled.**



# James McDonald

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## **Manager of Studies – Catholic Adult Education Centre**

James McDonald, Manager of Studies at CAEC, has more than 20 years of experience in youth and family ministry across Australia and internationally. He completed his Bachelor of Theology in 1997 through the Melbourne College of Divinity and is currently finishing his Master's degree in Sacred Theology at the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family in Melbourne. James worked in the Diocese of Broome as Youth Ministry Coordinator, and the Archdiocese of Melbourne as Director of Catholic Youth Ministry for five years. He was also Executive Officer for the Council for Marriage and Family in the Archdiocese of Melbourne for 18 months.

## **Catholic Adult Education Centre**

**No submission tabled.**

# Ann O'Brien

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## **Senior Manager, Centacare Catholic Social Services, Diocese of Parramatta**

Married to Peter for 33 years, Ann has four young adult children. She is a social worker and has worked as a marriage, relationship and family counsellor for most of her working life. In addition to preparing couples for marriage, Ann provides clinical supervision and is the Manager of Counselling and Education for Centacare Catholic Social Services in the Diocese of Parramatta. Ann has worked in a variety of social welfare settings including paediatric health, mental health, adoption, out of home care services for children and in professional development and training.

It was interesting to hear from Dr Bill Doherty regarding the work with couples on the brink of divorce – or what he has termed “mixed agenda couples”. The presentation about Discernment Counselling was a clear structured intervention model that can assist a counsellor/therapist working with couples who may have ambivalence about separation and divorce. The techniques used in this model are not new and used by counsellors working with these couples – however the structure presented was a clear and planned process that would assist counsellors in working with couples that have ambivalence.

As part of the discussion between participants it was confirmed that more emphasis is needed on a possible reconciliation question and support for couples “on the brink” of divorce. As part of training and supervision in marriage and family counselling, emphasis needs to be in supporting marriages wherever there is hope for reconciliation. We are currently developing a resource for counsellors to assist them in recognising these opportunities with couples and ideas and strategies to use in these counselling situations.

# Byron and Francine Pirola

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**Roundtable Convenors**  
**Directors of Marriage Formation, PMRC Australia**

Well known for their work spanning 20 years in marriage formation, Byron and Francine are the co-authors of several marriage formation resources and the My School Diary series. They are members of the Australian Catholic Marriage and Family Council, and Francine serves on the executive of the Catholic Society of Marriage Educators. They are the Directors of Marriage Formation for the Parish & Marriage Resource Centre (PMRC), Australia.

Byron and Francine are popular speakers at conferences both in Australia and abroad. Their marriage formation programmes and resources have been adopted in a number of countries including Great Britain and New Zealand.

**PMRC Australia**  
**W: [www.thepmrc.org](http://www.thepmrc.org)**

## The Divorce Superhighway

The devastating consequences of divorce on the spouses, the children, the extended family and the community are only too well known. Who among us doesn't know someone who has divorced and has seen first-hand the fallout which inevitably follows? No matter how 'amicable' it seems to be, the consequences can be long-lasting and far-reaching. For example, a number of studies have documented an increased likelihood of divorce among the children of divorced parents.

Naturally, there's a great deal of interest in the Church for assisting couples in troubled or crisis marriages; almost every diocese has counselling services and there are a number of lay organisations, such as Retrouvaille, tasked for this purpose. By and large, they do a wonderful job with limited resources.

The question remains: Is this the best we can do and is this the smartest way to approach a very serious and significant problem?

With this question in mind it was opportune to be able to convene and participate in the roundtable discussion lead by one of America's foremost family therapists, Dr Bill Doherty, on the topic of reconciliation among divorcing couples. He noted that a significant proportion of couples are ambivalent about their divorce, but once they 'file', it's like they are on a superhighway with no exit ramps. Or to use another metaphor, the train has left the station and it's too late to get off.

Once a couple initiates divorce proceedings, there's often little opportunity for them to change tracks. Wanting to be helpful and/or efficient, lawyers, judges, court officials, mediation officers, schools, carers, friends and family, all tend to work towards the goal of divorce; getting the kids settled, new homes set up, healing the emotional carnage. No one wants to aggravate either spouse or the children by holding onto the hope of saving the marriage if there really is no hope.

While everyone wants to make divorce less painful, sometimes we do a disservice to couples. Many couples do have second thoughts about a decision to divorce. Often the realisation hits them that divorce isn't going to release them from the requirement to interact with each other – if they have children, they will need to be

even better communicators than they were when married to keep the family functioning as they coordinate across two households.

Other times, divorce is initiated in the midst of a major crisis that only coincidentally pits the spouses against each other. It can definitely be ugly, but sometimes it's not the marriage which is causing them grief. With the passing of time, and the passing of the crisis, things spontaneously improve between them. In some cases, a period of controlled separation can be quite productive in breaking an entrenched conflict and giving the spouses the 'space' to deal with their own issues in all these circumstances. There's a lot to be said for a cooling off period – it gives spouses the opportunity to let things settle before terminating the marriage.

## Significant Insights from Doherty

There were a number of insights from Bill Doherty's input that we would highlight.

1. **Challenging the assumption** that everyone who presents for a divorce is committed to the process. According to Doherty's study<sup>1</sup>, around 25% of couples presenting for divorce indicated that they believed the marriage could be saved. 11% (just under half) of those couples were matched pairs (both the husband and wife); i.e., both thought their marriage could be saved. Roughly a third of individuals indicated interest in reconciliation services.
2. **Motivation Discrepancy.** When couples present voluntarily for marriage counselling there is often a discrepancy between them in their commitment to the marriage, to their motivation to change, to their openness to a particular therapy/therapist. Doherty calls them 'mixed agenda couples'. Successful counsellors acknowledge this important agenda.
3. **Discernment Counselling.** This is Doherty's framework for dealing with the discrepancy in motivation. It involves both individual sessions and couple sessions. In the individual sessions he uses different strategies according to the motivations of each spouse. The goal of Discernment Counselling is to assist the couple in deciding whether to do marriage therapy for a defined period (e.g. six months)– it is not marriage therapy itself. This discernment process is critical. If both spouses are not committed to marital therapy it will be ineffective, or at least limited, in achieving reconciliation.

## Reconciliation

Once a couple is committed to rebuilding their marriage, there are a number of different pathways. For couples where alcohol, drugs, mental illness, abuse, addictions or violence is involved, referral to other services is often a necessary part of the therapy. Healing for emotional wounds from outside the marriage can be valuable and is often undertaken by a spouse individually. General relationship skills commonly taught on many marriage enrichment programs can also be effective components, especially once the more difficult challenges are addressed and the couple is looking to establish new ways of relating in order to maintain their relationship.

At some stage, couples need to reconcile and heal the wounds inflicted by each other in order for the marriage to really flourish. It begs the question: What are we, as a community and as a Church invested in marriage and family, doing to help couples reconcile? Given that 'reconciliation' is a supreme value in the Catholic community, it's surprising how poorly equipped we are to do it. And it's not just about reconciliation for couples on the brink. It's also teaching couples in solid marriages how to reconcile the everyday bumps and bruises of life. After all, it's these accumulated 'bumps and bruises' that eventually cause the 'last straw' – the offense that is just one too many to take.

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<sup>1</sup> Interest in marital Reconciliation among Divorcing Parents.

Doherty, W.J., Willoughby B.J., Peterson, B. Family Court Review, Vol 49 No. 2 April 2011, 313-321

While some couples will be ‘natural’ reconcilers either because of their conflict-avoidant personalities or deep formation in virtue, the vast majority of couples benefit from specific formation in the essential elements of reconciliation itself. Specifically:

1. **Acknowledging the damage.** Most times, both spouses have been wounded by the other. In order for them to be free to release their interior wounds, it is necessary for each spouse to carefully articulate their feelings of hurt. This process requires both a willingness to vulnerably self-reveal by the sharing spouse, and a firm commitment to self-restraint by the listening spouse so that a trusting atmosphere can be established.
2. **Expressing sorrow.** Saying “I’m sorry” and expressing genuine regret is an important statement that reassures the injured spouse of the sincerity of the offender. It is a vulnerable sharing of the offender’s feelings as they accept responsibility for the damage they have caused.
3. **Asking for forgiveness** is different and more difficult than expressing sorrow. “Please forgive me” is a request that willingly surrenders all power to the injured spouse. It takes great humility to ask for forgiveness. When this is mutually expressed when there is hurt on both sides, it is a powerful experience for the couple.
4. **Committing to change** not only safeguards against further injury, it is a further indication of the sincerity of the offender.
5. **Granting forgiveness** is a decision by the injured spouse to release all feelings of ill-will toward the offender. For many it is accompanied by a distinctive experience of healing, though healing often comes later for some people.
6. **Rebuilding trust.** The rebuilding of trust may be immediate or take several months if the offense was substantial. The injured spouse will naturally feel anxious about further hurt and so the responsibility for re-establishing trust requires a sustained commitment by both spouses.

Reconciliation is a process that requires vulnerability on the part of both the offending and injured spouse. While it is possible for one spouse to unilaterally initiate the above process, it isn’t really reconciliation unless both participate. This presents immediate difficulties when there is a motivation discrepancy between them. If the injured spouse is the reluctant party, the offending spouse may need to work hard at rebuilding trust (step six) in order for the injured spouse to be willing to risk the vulnerability of the reconciliation process.

Moreover, when there is mutual hurt, it can be difficult for each spouse to own their culpability before their own injury is acknowledged. Thus many couples get locked in a stale-mate, with neither willing to risk the first move to reconciliation. Marriage educators<sup>2</sup> can be particularly helpful in motivating couples to move beyond their gridlock. Careful constructed exercises that walk couples through a process can be particularly helpful.

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<sup>2</sup> A key feature of the Celebrate Love seminar for married couples is the Trust-Reconciliation session in which couples are carefully facilitated through a bilateral reconciliation process with very effective results.

## **Saving marriages before they start**

If we, as a church community, want to be able to offer effective reconciliation support for couples in seriously threatened marriages, we need to be thinking about teaching couples before they even marry how to reconcile and heal the rifts between them. It's possibly one of the most essential skills in a pre-marriage or marriage enrichment course.

Yet not many courses even address it. The course may deal with 'conflict resolution' but this is different to reconciliation. Conflict Resolution teaches couples how to avoid unnecessary conflict, argue fairly, disagree respectfully, state their needs clearly. These are good skills, but they won't help the couple when they have a devastating argument; and most will have arguments irrespective of all the training we can give them. This is the unique domain of reconciliation and a different strategy is needed.

## **Sacramental Graces**

The Sacrament of Penance offered by the Catholic Church can be an invaluable aid to spouses and couples undergoing reconciliation. Virtues such as humility, self-restraint, honesty, fidelity and gentleness are essential for the success of any reconciliation. These graces are readily available to all couples who seek to immerse themselves in the sacramental life of the Church.

While specific professional intervention is often necessary for couples in crisis or troubled marriages, it is important not to overlook the positive contribution that prayer and the sacraments can bring to the situation. The power of the Sacrament of Penance is particularly significant and an experienced confessor can be an invaluable resource to the couple. It is incongruous that as we increasingly 'professionalise' marriage support services, we simultaneously separate 'grace' from 'skills'; as though one can optimally work in the absence of the other. In fact, we would counter that grace and virtues are a critical aspect and what might be an essential distinguishing feature between good secular counselling and Catholic counselling.

# Frances Rix

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## **Family Centre Manager – CatholicCare, Diocese of Broken Bay**

Frances Rix is a Family Therapist with 20 years of experience working with families and supervising staff in Health and in NGOs. Frances also worked for five years for DOCS and has been with Centacare Broken Bay for more than six years in counselling and as a co-ordinator. She is currently the Family Centre Manager of Gosford and Wyong. She is a clinical member of the Counsellors and Psychotherapists Association as well as PACFA.

**No submission tabled.**

# Sandra Lynch

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**Associate Professor – School of Philosophy & Theology and  
Director – Centre for Faith, Ethics and Society, University of Notre Dame**

Dr Sandra Lynch holds a BA from the University of Illinois, an MA (Hons.) from Macquarie University and a PhD in philosophy from the University of NSW. She also has a background as a school teacher (Diploma of Education - Wollongong Teachers' College). Her research interests lie in the areas of ethics and values education, the constitution of the self, friendship, critical thinking, and the intersection of philosophy and literature. Sandra's background in education has led to a long-standing involvement in the Philosophy in Schools Association of NSW and in the promotion of critical and creative thinking skills in schools and in university classrooms.

The theme of the Catholic Counsellors Roundtable held in August - "Reconciliation and Couples on the Brink" – introduced participants to Dr Doherty's research and his wisdom in relation to dealing with relationship breakdown within marriage in light of the partners' interest in trying to achieve reconciliation.

One of the premises of Dr Doherty's research and of the roundtable discussion generally was that marriage is a crucial social institution which provides the context for strong, enduring relationships in which the families and future generations may be nurtured and developed. Another premise was that marriage education is valuable since it can assist marriage partners in improving their communication skills, appreciating one another's roles in the relationship, being realistic about their expectations of one another and developing skills to deal with conflict reasonably.

However, since the discussion dealt with couples on the brink or verge of breakdown, Dr Doherty and the participants drew attention to the negative impact of marital discord and separation on spouses and its effects on children. As Catholic Counsellors and academics, the focus of our discussion was on the role of counselling in attempting to intervene in the process of marital breakdown and in ameliorating the damage it can cause.

We were interested in discussing the kind of assistance to married couples which is informed by the latest scholarship on marital breakdown and reconciliation and Dr Doherty's research is an example of current and innovative research. What was most arresting for me as a participant was the role that feelings of ambivalence play in Dr Doherty's research and how they affect his approach to marriage counselling. Effective counselling firstly demands recognition of any ambivalence which one or other partner might feel about the possibility of saving the marriage; and secondly it requires a decision as to whether those feelings can be overcome so as to give counselling the prospect of some success. So, Dr Doherty outlined a two-step process in which partners who are facing marital breakdown first consider their own motivations, hopes and expectations. It is only when partners are willing to make a genuine commitment to marriage counselling and to the possibility of reconciliation that the second step - counselling - actually begins.

Using a survey sample of 2, 484 divorcing parents surveyed after taking parent classes, Dr Doherty's research on the interest of divorcing parents in reconciliation indicated that 1 in 4 individual parents expressed some belief that their marriage could be saved; in about 1 in 9 matched couples both partners



shared this belief. About 3 in 10 individuals indicated potential interest in reconciliation services, however as one might expect the partner who did not initiate the divorce was more likely to have this interest.

From the perspective of an academic lecturing in ethics to students at the University of Notre Dame Australia, it occurred to me in listening to the discussion that there may well be a role in our university's Core Curriculum program for an exploration of understandings and expectations of marriage. The Core Curriculum has a formative as well as an academic focus. One of its objectives is to try to create in students habits of philosophical and theological reflection that will last a lifetime and have a positive effect on autonomy and rational decision-making.

Students in the program are encouraged to critically reflect on themselves, on understandings of the human person, on the meaning of life, on the notion of a good life and on what a commitment to faith and living a life of virtue requires. This curriculum would seem to provide an opportunity to assist students not simply to reflect on these ideas, but also to consider and develop strategies which could empower and enable them to deal with the challenges of marriage.

An emphasis on self-reflection, on exploring one's own and others' attitudes toward marriage, on appreciating the joy and potency of marriage and its capacity to enhance our lives could be juxtaposed to the challenges of creating genuine and sustainable relationships. A theologically well-informed approach to marriage and a compassionate approach to discord might be expected to have a positive impact on student expectations of marriage. In turn this might help develop emotional intelligence and have at least some impact on precisely those skills and attitudes which marriage educators aim to develop – not least because they are skills which provide a foundation for civilised interaction between all those with whom we engage.

# Appendix

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## Delaying divorce to save marriages: The Second Chances Act

The Washington Post

By William J. Doherty and Leah Ward Sears

October 20, 2011

Conventional wisdom holds that about half of U.S. marriages end in divorce — and that most Americans wish the divorce rate were lower. Still, many are skeptical about whether we can lower the divorce rate without trapping more people in bad marriages.

This skepticism is fuelled by two common assumptions: Divorce happens only after a long process of misery and conflict; and, once couples file for divorce, they don't entertain the idea of reconciling.

We now know those assumptions are wrong.

Research over the past decade has shown that a major share of divorces (50 to 66 per cent, depending on the study) occur between couples who had average happiness and low levels of conflict in the years before the divorce.

Contrary to popular belief, only a minority of divorcing couples experience high conflict and abuse during their marriages. Most divorces occur with couples who have drifted apart and handle everyday disagreements poorly. It is these “average” divorces that research shows are the most harmful to children.

In their study documenting the difference between high conflict and average divorces, sociologists Paul Amato and Alan Booth offer this promising conclusion: “Our results suggest that divorces with the greatest potential to harm children occur in marriages that have the greatest potential for reconciliation.”

But do any parents already in the divorce process still want to save their marriages?

William J. Doherty and his team of researchers asked 2,500 divorcing parents in Minnesota who were well along in that process whether they were interested in services to help them reconcile. In at least 10 per cent of these divorce cases, both spouses were open to efforts to reconcile — and in another 30 per cent, one spouse was interested in reconciliation. Results for couples earlier in the divorce process were even more promising.

In other words, a substantial number of today's divorces may be preventable.

Why does this matter?

As a long time jurist, Leah Ward Sears held a front-row seat in witnessing how family fragmentation affects children. She saw the overwhelming anger, depression and grief that plague children when their parents are splitting up. Her concerns grew as she also noticed links between divorce and poverty, divorce and juvenile delinquency, divorce and mental health illnesses, and even divorce and violent crimes. Even a modest reduction in divorce could benefit more than 400,000 U.S. children each year.

Can we as a society do anything to support the marital union of these children's parents, especially those interested in saving their marriages?

We propose a modest reform that U.S. state legislatures can enact: the Second Chances Act, which combines a minimum, one-year waiting period for divorce with education about the option of reconciliation. With regard to waiting periods, there is considerable variation among states. Forty-six states have waiting periods of six months or less, including 10 states that have no waiting periods. No other Western nation has waiting periods as short as the United States. In Western Europe, three-year waiting periods are common.

A one-year waiting period would ensure that the law is not moving couples — who are often at one of the most intense emotional periods of their lives — more rapidly toward divorce than perhaps they intended or wanted.

Our proposal, which we plan to roll out to a few states and then pursue nationally, would also require parents of minor children considering divorce to take a short, pre-filing parenting education course. This education component, which could be completed online, would include information on reconciliation (along with resources for couples who choose to pursue that course) and information on a non-adversarial approach to divorce. Forty-six states already require some form of parenting classes for divorcing couples with minor children, although most couples take the classes when they are well along in the divorce process. Tragically, educators who teach these classes report that some parents say such things as “I wish I had known these things when we first broke up.”

Empowering couples with this education before they divorce, combined with information about the option of reconciliation, is a win-win situation: It gives individuals a second chance for their marriages, and it gives everyone — regardless of whether they pursue reconciliation — a chance for a less adversarial divorce process.

We are under no illusion that the Second Chances Act is a panacea for lowering divorce rates. And we are certainly not advocating keeping destructive marriages together. (Under our proposal, the waiting period can be waived if there is abuse.) But we now know that a significant number of divorces may be preventable. This modest reform could spare many couples and children the pain of an unnecessary divorce.

William J. Doherty is a professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota and director of the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project <http://mncouplesonthebrink.org>. Leah Ward Sears, a partner at the law firm of Schiff Hardin, was chief justice of the Georgia Supreme Court from 2005 to 2009. They are the authors of “Second Chances: A Proposal to Reduce Unnecessary Divorce.”

Marriage Resource Centre

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