



# STRENGTHENING MARRIAGES

"WE WERE LEARNING TO BRING JESUS INTO THE HEART OF OUR MARRIAGE."  
- EUGENE SMITH

## WHEN DO WE GO FOR HELP AS A COUPLE?

Relationships of all kinds need constant care and attention to keep them healthy and happy. A marriage relationship is no different. In fact, because it is a close and lifetime commitment in most cases, we need to give it special attention. Our happiness, our homes and our children's security depend largely on good solid marriage relationships.

Vicky McEvoy, a couple's counsellor and Executive Member of the Irish Association of Christian Counsellors from Dublin, suggests that we should put our marriages through regular N.C.T. or M.O.T. tests. Marriage courses and weekend workshops to check are frequently on offer around the country.

These courses and weekends focus on learning new skills and spending quality time together. They are helpful for all couples, at all stages, not just those who are in difficulty.

"In my experience, many couples wait until things are really bad before they ask for counselling help. That is such a shame," Vicky said. "A stitch in time saves nine. The IACC has lots of good counsellors who will be delighted to work short term or longer term with couples who want to restore, refresh or renew their relationship."

Find a list of counsellors on the IACC website, [www.iacc.ie](http://www.iacc.ie), or contact Oasis Counselling Service in Ballyfermot on 01 6268519.

Vital Connexions also run training courses for pastors and counsellors who wish to equip themselves to work with couples who come to them for help and advice.

Visit [www.vitalconnexions.net](http://www.vitalconnexions.net) to find out more.

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he focus in Cana is not so much about just the couple but about pointing both of them towards Jesus, and then they find unity together with Him." - Tim Phalan

"The Cana week is a unique experience - because children are included, it allows parents of even very young children to take time out for themselves as a couple and to grow spiritually." - Sally Phalan

Marriage relationships face complex challenges in 21st-century Ireland. Although figures for marriage breakdown in Ireland remain lower than in other EU countries, according to the Central Statistics Office, the number of separated and divorced people increased by 22.3% between 2006 and 2011 from 166,797 to 203,964. And Christian couples are not immune!

Cana Ireland is a ministry that seeks to strengthen marriage relationships. "Marriage is the cement that keeps society together. If there is a breakdown in marriage, then society breaks down," explained Eugene Smith, one of the national coordinators. "As a Christian couple living in today's world, you need support from others around you. We are hoping Cana can grow and strengthen marriages in local communities and society as a whole."

An international programme, Cana was born out of the Chemin Neuf Catholic community in France but is designed for all Christians. The programme begins with a six-day residential for couples. Children are welcome



and provided with their own programmes, designed for each age group and by a team of dedicated volunteers.

After the Cana week, couples are offered the chance to join a small group to provide on-going encouragement and support for one another.

The first Cana Ireland programme ran in Castledaly Manor near Athlone in 2012 with just six couples. The following

Maruska added, “I realise I had become resigned. Things were disturbing me and hurting me but I thought there was no chance it would change. I kept pushing things away and they built up and built up.

“We experienced a time to forgive each other and to ask for forgiveness. Sometimes that is not the easy thing to do, especially when you are living so

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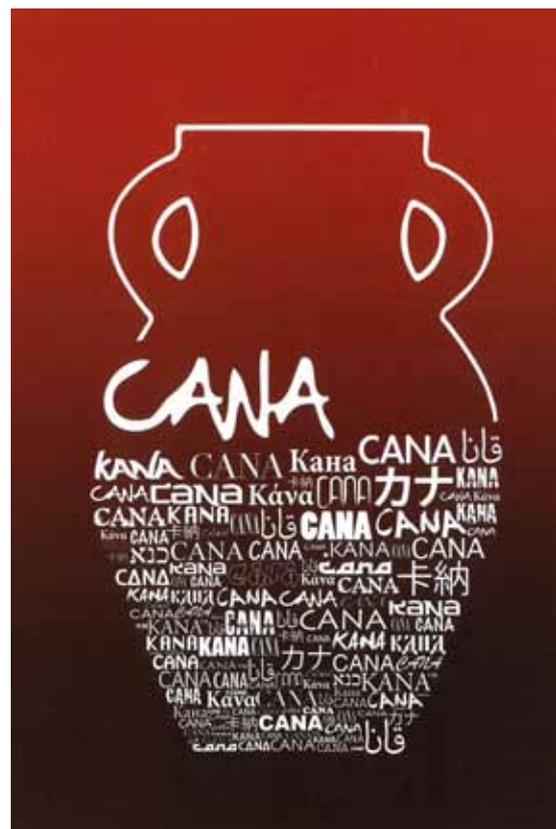
summer, 17 couples from all walks of life, ages and social backgrounds took part.

Eugene and his wife Maruska took part in a Cana week at a time when they felt their marriage was at a crossroads. “The honeymoon stage was over and there was a lot of dryness in our relationship,” Eugene said. “We were taking each other for granted.”

closely with someone.”

Growing together spiritually was particularly significant for Eugene and Maruska.

“During the week, people are really encouraged to pray as a couple,” Eugene said. “We had been used to praying on our own but we were never shown how to pray together. We were



learning to bring Jesus into the heart of our marriage.”

Tim Phalan, originally from America, and his wife Sally were the first to take part in a Cana programme and introduced it to many others in Ireland.

“The Holy Spirit runs the programme from beginning to end,” Sally explained. “Every Cana week is different. People are free to be themselves. First and foremost, it is a spiritual journey for the individuals and together as couples with an emphasis on healing and forgiveness.

“We enjoyed getting to know the other couples and we loved the community aspect of the week, which included moments of fun and

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celebration. We came away with so much. We've heard it said, 'Prayer is the oxygen of a marriage'. In Cana, we learned a new way to pray together.

Aldo and Orla Oliveri took part in the Cana retreat in summer 2013. The programme had a profound impact on their relationship with one another and with God.

Aldo shared, “We have always been a very argumentative couple. I come from Sicily. Over there, we are open but in a way that can be in-your-face for an Irish person. Orla always says what she thinks no matter what. Sometimes she can be very blunt. We loved each other a lot but it wasn't always easy.

Orla added, “We can have a Hollywood perspective on marriage. There is no real preparation. You go for a one- or two-day pre-marriage course and most of that is about how to file your tax return. Then you are let at it.”

When Orla picked up a leaflet about Cana, it seemed exactly what they needed. They booked right away.

“Our biggest concern was the children, but they had fun,” Aldo said. “Our little fellow had the time of his life with the other kids, learning songs and games.

“Coming home, we were warned we would miss the retreat. One day, we started to have an ‘animated discussion’!

I thought about what I had learnt and realised we had discovered a new way to communicate. We still argue, but we are learning. Our marriage is a work in progress.”

The next Cana course will run from 13 - 19 July 2014. Find out more from Eugene and Maruska Smith: telephone 0857330191 or email: canaireland@gmail.com



## MORE RESOURCES

### DON'T JUST SURVIVE... THRIVE!

Family Life Resources offers “Mind your Marriage” weekends around Ireland with the aim to give couples the time and space to refresh their relationship with helpful, encouraging and practical tools and teaching based on Christian principles.

Run by Derek and Trich Dodd from Ashford, Co Wicklow, the weekends are available as a resource to churches and Christian groups. Contact Family Life Resources for further information: 040442726, email: info@familyliferesources.ie or visit [www.familyliferesources.ie](http://www.familyliferesources.ie).

### THE ALPHA MARRIAGE COURSE

The Alpha Course is well known across many different churches in Ireland. Perhaps less well known is the Alpha Marriage course. Over seven sessions, couples are treated to a romantic meal at a table for two while listening to practical talks on the DVD. The focus is on giving the couple space to be together and to discuss explore vital issues for their relationship.

At a recent course in Blarney, County Cork, 11 couples provided feedback about their experience. Here are a few of their comments:

“It just has made us realise how much we love each other and how important we are in each other's lives. This is easily forgotten and taken for granted with busy workloads, small children, peer and family pressures.”

“We've tried a lot of things, and this has been the most practical, helpful – and enjoyable – by far.”

“...we have really looked forward to our Monday nights together at the marriage course. It helped me see how special marriage is and how much we have already. It also gave us really practical tools for tackling problems and making things better.”

Find out more at [www.alphaireland.org](http://www.alphaireland.org).