

Text Presented at World Meeting of Families 2018 Pastoral Congress, RDS, Dublin,
August 2018



**Dancing to the Future with Hope:
Strengthening Marriage & the Family today**

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Slide: 1

*"You've got to dance like no one's watching...
Love like you'll never been hurt...
Sing like no one's listening...
And live life... like its heaven on earth"*

This quotation has been attributed to many different people including Mark Twain. It captures wonderfully the heartfelt blessings that we wish on people who are about to marry because we want them to be happy, successful, and authentic. Each of us craves to be accepted as we truly are, rather than as others want us to be. For couples as they begin their new life together, we especially wish them to be able to be their true selves.

Good morning. My name is Geraldine Hallahan and I am a counsellor and psychotherapist. I work with Accord as a volunteer and have been facilitating and supporting marriage preparation courses for the past 10 years. When asked to speak at this conference, I did a quick calculation and was amazed to realise that I have worked with over 2,000 couples, supporting them as they prepare for the greatest dance of their lives.

Dancing is such a wonderful expression of emotion, but it doesn't happen without effort. It takes long hours of practice and hard work. Like marriage, along with hard work and patience, dancing requires communication, commitment, and cooperation. There are times when we lead, and times when we follow... but when the dancers are in unison, when the timing right... well, it truly is poetry in motion. In fact, it does look like living "Heaven on Earth".

Slide 2 (Life is simple Question Are you happy)

So why do I do this work... I have a deep desire to be authentic and to find meaning in my life. I have been fortunate in building a strong, warm and fulfilling relationship with my husband, and I love to share that experience with those who are preparing to marry. I don't have a perfect marriage. I have been married to Eugene for very many years, but throughout our lives, we have managed to stay "best friends" with each other. We have tried to ensure that our relationship takes precedence over either one of us, which I believe has been a key to our success. There have been good times and bad, but the good times far outweigh the rest. We have two adult children and are blessed with five beautiful grandchildren.

I do this work because I believe in the value of marriage, and I know that it is the bedrock of our society. It often seems, however, that marriage is under threat. Social media has become a saboteur of our precious time. According to recent statistics, young people spend an average of two hours a day on the internet and they look at their smartphones at least once every 12 minutes! No wonder couples can find communication challenging.

Research shows that young couples experience high demands and have high expectations, and can easily become stressed because they are “time poor”. The stress becomes dis-tress, if it is not managed well, which can be a trigger for escapism and result in overuse and even addiction to alcohol, drugs, pornography, or gambling. Each of these, in turn, can cause even more distance and pressure on a relationship.

But there are far more successful marriages than the ones that get into difficulty and in Accord we give couples the knowledge and insights to make their marriage a success.

Slide 3 How I do the work (Course outline):

As a facilitator, my role is to help couples get a clearer picture of reality and to focus on specific aspects of marriage where difficulties might arise and give them the tools and supports to help them to deal with adversity.

At Accord we developed eight modules for the course, including self-awareness, commitment, conflict, sexuality, parenting, communication, fertility and the Sacrament of Marriage.

Couples join as a group and we usually have up to 25 couples on a weekend course. However, the focus is very much on the individual couple and our aim is to get them “talking to each other”. We know from feedback this is often the first time they have spoken to each other on certain subjects. We encourage couples to be open to learning and we try to make it a fun and rewarding experience. What really engages couples though, is when I share my own personal stories and provide anecdotes from my own life experience.

They say if you don’t understand your family you are likely to repeat its patterns whether it makes sense or not. We begin the course focusing on self-awareness and on Family of Origin. It is crucial that the individual has an understanding of who they are and how they have been shaped and changed by their experiences of life so that they can embrace change. The core theme emphasises the enormous influence that the family we were brought up in has had in making us into the unique individuals we are today.

Becoming aware of who we are, and why we behave as we do, is the first step to transforming ourselves, and it also helps us to understand and accept our spouse and not try to change them to meet our often-unrealistic expectations.

What keeps me energised and gives me encouragement in the work I do, is the fantastic feedback that we receive from couples. For example, here’s a flavour of some of them....

Slide 4 (with Quotes)

“ I found out a few more things about myself and my partner”

“It made me realise how our different upbringings have shaped us both”

“It gave me a different perspective on the importance of Family of Origin for my finance and myself”

“We haven’t spoken about this before”

“Profound and deeply moving”

In Accord, we say that marriage is a journey, not a destination, and couples began that journey on the day they met and will continue that journey until one of them dies. It is wonderful to work with couples who are in love with each other, as they start their exciting journey together. I feel privileged

to share the joy and excitement of a couple at this special time of their lives when they are engaged and fully committed to each other.



Slide 5 (Fred Astaire)

Based on your family of origin, If your parent was a good dancer.... chances are you are too.... But as the great dancer Fred Astaire once said... *"Some people seem to think that good dancers are born... but all the good dancers I have known are taught or trained"*

So, if we feel we can't dance then we need to be open to learning and learning is best achieved in an atmosphere fun. And that's the atmosphere we in Accord create in preparing couples for marriage. Our young couples come to these courses with an expectation of hope and our role is to strengthen that hope and deepen their relationship and commitment to marriage.

Thank you.