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Speech By

**Séamus Brennan T.D.,
Minister For Social Affairs**

to the

ACCORD Conference 2006

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**Slieve Russell Hotel
Ballyconnell
Co. Cavan**

**Minister Warns of an Ireland Increasingly Displaying Selfishness,
Impatience and Arrogance**

***Brennan says how we respond to pressures of modern society
will be this generations legacy***

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It gives me great pleasure to address this important ACCORD Conference 2006. I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity to salute ACCORD and all of the people who dedicate so much of their time and energies to advising and assisting others.

Over many years, as a Deputy and a Minister and, particularly now as Minister for Social Affairs, I have become very familiar with the work of ACCORD. I have nothing but the greatest admiration for the sterling work you do in preparing couples for marriage.

Your marriage preparation courses are helping to build solid and practical foundations for couples. And in providing counselling to those couples whose marriages unfortunately run into difficulties you are often applying the glue that helps hold relationships together.

The role of marriage in promoting continuity and stability in family life is why ACCORD, and other organizations providing similar supports and services which care for marriage, receive strong State support and will continue to do so. The provision of these services has proved invaluable in offering people the means to safeguard and nourish their marriage and family relationships.

ACCORD is the primary provider of marriage counselling services and marriage preparation courses in the country. I have been delighted, through the Family Support Agency, to continue to develop the key counselling sector by providing funding direct to groups providing professional counselling services to support families and enhance family life.

In 2005, over €8.4 million was allocated to a record 543 groups covering every area of the country. I am pleased to announce that this year, an additional €600,000 is being provided to continue to promote, support and develop organisations providing counselling and family support. That brings the total available to over €9 million and I will continue to work on increasing funding and supports.

Last year, grants totalling some €2.75 million, or almost one-third of the full funding available, were directed to ACCORD, between the head office in Maynooth and almost 50 centres nationwide. This year I look forward to confirming further

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substantial funding support for ACCORD once the Family Support Agency have concluded their assessment of what is required.

As all of you know from your experiences, the challenges facing society in Ireland today differ greatly from those that would have existed when ACCORD was founded in the early 1960s. Today, we are witnessing a new, vibrant, multi-cultural Ireland that is emerging and getting into its stride. It is an Ireland that offers unlimited opportunity. An Ireland that in a few short years has enthusiastically gone from "can't do" to "can do".

But, as all of you know from experience; economic, social and cultural success does not cure all ills - it comes at a price. Ireland must now face up to new pressures and fresh challenges-what you could call the problems of swift and remarkable success.

I am struck, for example, by how many Irish people are increasingly displaying what I view as selfishness, impatience and, even, an arrogance. This to me is something that runs against the grain of the humanity and decency that we as a nation have always prided ourselves on.

How we hold onto that humanity and hold onto that decency must surely be one of the greatest challenges that all of us face going into the future.

ACCORD, and other agencies and organizations that are working at the coalface of a changing society, can, and are, playing an increasingly influential role in helping all of us to meet those challenges.

For my own part, I have embarked on a programme of social policy reforms designed to directly address many of the problems and issues confronting Ireland in the first years of the 21st century. These reforms, while protecting those who are disadvantaged amongst us, must also strive to get behind the welfare payments and tackle the social issues involved.

It is a well-established fact that the best route out of poverty is through employment. That is why through these reforms I want to create the changes and

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opportunities that will bring people from welfare dependency to financial independence by providing the stepping-stones to a better standard of living and income.

In this context, I fully appreciate the challenges facing you in caring for marriage in a society where there are many differing views and attitudes to marriage and where cohabitation, births outside marriage, separation and divorce are commonplace. This results in greater discontinuity and instability in family life and makes the work of an organisation such as ACCORD more challenging but ultimately more rewarding.

You are also working today in an Ireland, which includes people of many different nationalities with diverse cultures and backgrounds. This provides challenges and opportunities to us all as we strive to build an inclusive multicultural society.

I want to today salute ACCORD for the enthusiastic way in which it is embracing the integrating of this growing multi-cultural society, both in terms of membership of ACCORD and service provision. What ACCORD is building and achieving with its integration approach must serve as an example for many others to follow.

The reality is that Ireland is increasingly becoming multi-cultural. This will become more evident over the next 15 years or so as our population grows by another million people. For Ireland, a multi-cultural society is a new experience, and a new opportunity. We must grasp that opportunity by making sure that we blend compassion with practical responses. We must achieve the balance that sensibly absorbs immigrants into our expanding society so that all are cherished equally.

In today's pressurized, fast lane society, I know you are finding that couples often expect more from their marriage relationship than they would have in the past. Overall, this is a good thing. But, the downside is that this may increase the risk of failure. This is compounded by the greater pressures couples are under, especially in reconciling work and family life, securing a home in a tight housing market, paying

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rent or a mortgage and maintaining the lifestyle to which they have become accustomed.

The quote from the Commission on the Family that “Families today have too little time for themselves, their relatives and friends, their communities - the crucial support networks on which they depend in times of family difficulty” is more real today than it ever was.

With the pace of life today and the erosion of these networks it has become more difficult for people to maintain strong and stable relationships. Separation and divorce, while thankfully not at levels in other countries, are nonetheless on the increase. Children above all benefit from stability and continuity in their family life and from a regular and close relationship with both parents. Marriage makes a major contribution to achieving this goal and, therefore, has always commanded respect and support in Irish society.

We may now be more pluralist and thus more tolerant and accepting of other forms of family life and the many and varying circumstances that give rise to them. But the pre-eminent role of marriage in fostering continuity and stability in family life is still recognized and still widely supported, as reflected in the Constitution which requires the State to “guard with special care the institution of marriage”.

Statistics have shown that marriage is on the increase, with over 20,000 marriages taking place here annually. Marriage is still seen by the majority of people as their preferred choice in terms of both their futures and creating a stable and just society.

The Oireachtas All-Party Committee on the Constitution, which reported recently, recommended that the definition of the family should remain unchanged, while at the same time proposing a number of legislative changes to close gaps in social protection which may exist. In making these recommendations, they recognised that the traditional family based on marriage has presented great benefits to our society. It has given social stability and, in general, it has provided a most favourable context in which to rear children.

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In the changing society that is Ireland today, I am glad to see ACCORD examining, as you did over the weekend, your core values as an organisation and whether or not they are being eroded in organisations and society today.

I would also like to take the opportunity to commend you on the innovative nature of this year's Conference, featuring workshops in both music and art which promoted care for self as well as an awareness of how other therapies can assist in the search for value in self and your clients.

The third part of your Conference looked at work, which has been delivered in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. In this regard I believe special praise is due to Michael McGowan, the Education Officer for ACCORD Northern Ireland who has done tremendous work in educating students there in the whole area of Relationship and Sexuality Education. It is, I think you will agree, an example of how the two parts of this island can learn from each other and share information to everybody's benefit.

In conclusion, let me say that today we stand firmly in the doorway of the 21st century. It is a good time to consider how the generations that follow will look back and judge us for what we achieved. I think they will look back on us as the people who had a grasp of the Holy Grail of economic success, wealth, full employment and endless opportunity. And most of all they will judge us on how we used that prized possession. Somehow I doubt they will be too impressed by how many millionaires, even billionaires, we created during our time in that economic oasis.

Instead, and rightly so, they will judge us on how we harnessed that unprecedented splurge of wealth to reach down and lift up those who had been left behind by our buoyant economy. How we reached down and lifted children out of distress. How we recognised and rewarded our older people. How we reached out and offered a helping hand, support and encouragement to those whose relationships and families were in danger of fracturing and splintering. And how, in this 21st century Ireland, we preserved our humanity and our dignity so that, above all else, we can be proud of the nation we have become. How well we respond to these challenges, these hopes, these aspirations will, at the end of the day, be our legacy.

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It gives me great pleasure to formally declare the Conference closed and to again salute your work, your compassion and your valued contribution to the shaping of the Ireland of the 21st century.

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