

A Challenge to Pastors

As pastor, you are the key to effective marriage and family ministries in your church. Others may attend to details, but only you as pastor can articulate the vision and motivate actions to strengthen marriages and families in your congregation and in your community.

Why marriage and family ministries? Families provide the primary context for faith-development and for nurturing disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. A stable and happy marriage based on a life-long commitment provides the most effective nurture for children from infancy through adolescence to adulthood. The disruption or breakdown of a marriage affects both immediate and extended family members and results in high costs to society at large.

Effective marriage and family ministries support all family members in reaching their full potential and maintaining healthy relationships. Singles also benefit from connection with stable families and from ministries that foster self-awareness, understanding of others, and effective communication and conflict-management skills. We encourage you to develop a comprehensive ministry of relationship education and support, including the training of mentor couples to work with families at four major windows of opportunity.

1. **Wedding** – pre- and post- wedding through the first years of marriage
2. **Birth or adoption of a child and infant baptism** - (whether parents are married or not)
3. **Transitions** – developmental changes as both children and parents mature
4. **Crises** – major health challenges, accidents, addictions, or job loss

The number of married couples in a typical congregation is approximately 20 to 25 percent of the church membership. For example, there will be about 20 to 30 married couples in a church of 100 members; 200 to 300 married couples in a church of 1,000 members. **If only five or ten percent of these couples become Mentor Couples, your church could provide effective marriage and family ministries for each of the above windows of opportunity.** Mentor Couples provide short-term or ongoing support, demonstrate healthy relationships, bring both female and male perspectives to each family situation, establish safe boundaries among all persons involved, and provide connections between each family and the congregation.

Your congregation has the potential to establish an ongoing group of trained and dedicated marriage and family Mentor Couples, but it takes YOU as pastor to call this ministry into existence. You know when the above windows of opportunity occur in the homes of your congregation, which puts you in the key role of connecting couples and families in need with appropriate Mentor Couples. **One simple invitation to your congregation could bring forth several couples for an initial introductory session to learn about marriage and family mentoring.**

Chapter Eight of the *Growing Love in Christian Marriage Pastor's Manual* (Third Edition, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013) provides basic information for recruitment, training and on-going support of mentor couples, and on pages 96-97 you will find descriptions of two resources for mentor couple programs. For more information, see the document titled "Marriage Mentoring" posted under "Marriage Preparation" at <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries> and also at www.marriagelovepower.net under "Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources." You can bring in other leaders and staff to develop and manage such a program, BUT it takes YOU as pastor to get this ministry going. Your church can do it IF you lead the way.

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