

## **UNITED METHODIST ANNUAL CONFERENCE INITIATIVES FOR STRENGTHENING MARRIAGES AND FAMILIES**

### **Holston Conference**

Rev. Pete and Ginny Rowlett served as liaison couple for the Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment (now Better Marriages) to the UM General Board of Discipleship for a number of years. At the 2003 Holston Annual Conference session, they presented a resolution based on one prepared by the General Board of Discipleship for General Conference in 2004. That resolution included six challenges to the annual conference:

- 1). Encourage pastors to take seriously the importance of premarital counseling for those seeking marriage.
- 2). Recommend that congregations offer classes and programs related to parenting, relationship education, faith formation in the family, communication skills, conflict management, marriage preparation, and marriage enrichment.
- 3). Request that the Board of Ordained Ministry make resources available to those entering the ministry that will strengthen their marriages and prepare them for the particular issues faced by clergy families.
- 4). Instruct the Wesley Institute to provide leadership training for clergy and laity in programs for marriage and family enrichment.
- 5). Charge the Discipleship Team to coordinate a significant response to the urgent need that married couples have to be supported in their efforts to establish and sustain healthy marriages.
- 6). Cooperate with other agencies that are committed to our goals of marriage and family enrichment.

Holston Conference established a Task Force to assess current marriage and family ministries within the conference and to make recommendations to the 2004 annual conference session. That report noted the following priority needs: marital enrichment events for clergy and laity, training for clergy in marital and pre-marital counseling, a resource center/lending library with relevant materials, expanded counseling services or counseling referral sources, support for single-parent families and their children, support for families going through divorce.

The Task Force held a clergy/spouse marriage enrichment retreat in April, 2005; distributed a brief video titled "Marriage and Family Ministry in Your Church" for use in every local church; reviewed resources and made them available through the conference library; and compiled a list of counseling referral resources. The work of the Task Force was then entrusted to existing conference agencies for on-going implementation.

The Holston Conference has continued to sponsor a weekend marriage enrichment retreat every year for couples serving in professional ministry, funded fully by the conference budget. As of 2014, seventy-two couples had participated. These couples were all invited to a "reunion weekend" in 2014, and so many of them signed up that two retreats were held. Five other leader couples have now been trained through Better Marriages, and with guidance from Pete and Ginny Rowlett, they planned and provided most of the leadership for the reunion retreats. These younger couples are committed to the continuation of this ministry.

In 2008, after attending John Van Epp's training for "How to Avoid Falling in Love with a Jerk" at an ACME (now Better Marriages) Conference, Pete and Ginny offered the course twice, both on five consecutive Tuesday evenings. The enthusiastic response of their participants

convinced them to bring Van Epp to Knoxville to present a one-day Instructor Certification Seminar for the Holston Conference. Thirty-seven United Methodists attended and became certified, including pastors, teachers, counselors, campus ministers, youth directors, and a person who works with abused women. At least one person from each of the Holston Conference twelve districts participated. Funds from the conference budget and fees paid by participants covered the costs and provided scholarship help as needed. Participants reported outstanding results from teaching this course and encouraged others to get certified online through Van Epp's website ([www.nojerks.com](http://www.nojerks.com)). In 2009, Holston Conference held a major event to help clergy recognize and deal more effectively with domestic violence. For more information, contact Ginny and Pete Rowlett at 865-966-9776, [p.rowlett@charter.net](mailto:p.rowlett@charter.net). Visit [www.bettermarriages.org](http://www.bettermarriages.org) to learn more about Better Marriages.

### **New England Conference**

Since returning to New England in 2004, Jane Ives has led workshops during annual conference sessions, clergy retreats, and congregational development events, as well as for several cooperative parishes around the area. She has developed a list of interested persons to whom she sends information about upcoming events and reports of local church initiatives. She also shares this information through the conference e-newsletter and sets up a display table at annual conference sessions and other gatherings. The conference website, [www.neumc.org](http://www.neumc.org) offers a link to Marriage and Family Ministries (under Mission and Ministry) where updated information is posted, along with an annotated list of resources available within the conference. Jane has donated many curriculum resources to the conference resource library and books to the Boston University School of Theology library. She has recruited a team to coordinate and plan marriage and family ministries, which has created a "Speakers' Bureau," also posted at the website, and is currently developing a list of "Counselors, Relationship Coaches, and Spiritual Directors Recommended by United Methodists." In August, 2014, Cliff and Jane Ives are co-leading a Better Marriages Leadership Training Workshop in Maine. Jane also responds to inquiries about resources for individuals, couples, and local churches or groups of churches to strengthen relationships and to provide relationship education and ministries. Jane posts "Best Practices and Recommended Resources" article on a variety of topics (marriage preparation, relationship education for youth, strengthening clergy families, divorce care and recovery, etc.) at [www.marriagelovepower.net](http://www.marriagelovepower.net). Some of these articles are also posted at [www.gbod.org](http://www.gbod.org).

### **Virginia Conference**

The **Virginia Conference** has partnered with other denominations and local churches through *First Things First of Greater Richmond Marriage Enrichment Coalition* to bring major marriage enrichment events to the Richmond Metro, featuring well-known presenters such as Mark Gungor, Michael and Amy Smalley, and Gary Chapman. In 2015, they will host Gary Thomas, who will present "Sacred Marriage" on Saturday August 23, 2015, and "Sacred Search for Singles" Friday evening, August 22. More information at [www.FirstThingsRichmond.org](http://www.FirstThingsRichmond.org). First Things Richmond also offers a number of events and ongoing group experiences, all featured on the website.

A new marriage resource for this area is the "Marriage & Relationship Coaching Center of Central VA." Dianne and Bob Ruthazer, CFLE, provide unique low cost and high quality Couple Coaching together as a married couple, giving clients both a male and female perspective. The Ruthazers have been married 36 years and have helped thousands of couples

over the past 21 years in Richmond. More information at [www.MarriageRelationshipCoach.org](http://www.MarriageRelationshipCoach.org).

### **California-Nevada Conference**

Jerry and Sue Angove reported several years ago that Marriage Encounter UM ([www.encounter.org](http://www.encounter.org)) was presenting Engaged Encounter weekends twice a year in the **California-Nevada Conference** for couples in a serious dating relationship or those already engaged, as well as **Marriage Encounter weekends** for couples married at least three years or more wanting to strengthen their relationships.

Glenn and Gwen Tilton, of Sacramento, California, met with Bishop Beverly Shamana following the 2007 Smart Marriages Conference in Denver. Bishop Shamana followed up by attending a *10 Great Dates* presentation by David and Claudia Arp at Rancho Cordova UMC and by using the materials with her husband, then writing an enthusiastic endorsement of the program for the conference newsletter. The Tiltons wrote a concept paper in 2007 and were awarded a \$30,000 grant from the California Healthy Marriage Coalition to develop Marriage Education classes in the California-Nevada Conference. Working with Carolyn Curtis and her Relationship Skills Center of Sacramento (<http://skillscenter.org>), they trained in “Mastering the Mysteries of Love” (<http://www.skillswork.org/mml-curriculum/mastering-the-mysteries-of-love/>), offered programs and classes, and encouraged churches to provide such programming. They received the best responses from areas already active in relationship education: Reno, San Jose, and Los Angeles.

### **Central Texas Conference**

The Central Texas Conference Marriage and Family Advisory Council sponsored a training event in September 2004 and a three-day couples retreat in January 2005 at the Central Texas Conference Glen Lake Camp and Retreat Center, where a new Marriage Ministries Center Lodge was dedicated in January 2004. The *Growing Love in Christian Marriage* eight-hour couples’ pre-marital workshop continues to be offered each semester at Texas Wesleyan University in Ft. Worth. Participating couples receive a certificate of completion worth a \$60. discount toward the Texas marriage license fee of \$68. Several churches and pastors regularly use *Growing Love in Christian Marriage* with couples for their marriage preparation. Richard and Joan Hunt worked with the conference to develop *Keeping Our Sacred Trust*, training designed to prevent clergy sexual misconduct, which the conference requires all pastors to complete. For more information on these programs, contact [richard.hunt@verizon.com](mailto:richard.hunt@verizon.com).

Please let me know about other initiatives for strengthening marriages and families in the annual conferences around our United Methodist Connection.

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