

Best Practices in Marriage Preparation Ministry

Marriage preparation provides a unique opportunity to transform lives and influence the emotional health and spiritual growth of couples, families, and generations to come. When persons begin to plan a wedding, however, they may be so focused on the ceremony and reception that they need encouragement to think about their relationship and to approach their life together with intentionality. The pastor and a team of couples with healthy marriages can develop a church marriage preparation policy designed to improve couples' chances for building healthy, life-long marriages. Requiring a minimum number of counseling sessions, meetings with a mentor couple, and/or participation in group sessions or classes will help enlist couples to engage in

- supportive counseling relationships within which they can explore their expectations and concerns while learning about the normal stages of marriage;
- assessment and processing of what each brings to the relationship, including both the strengths on which they can build and the inevitable areas of difference likely to require some special attention;
- opportunities to learn and practice skills for effective communication and conflict-management.

Couples planning a wedding will most likely be in a state of limerence, their brains flooded with the feel-good chemicals that stimulate the ecstatic emotions of being “in love.” After you have listened to and affirmed their story, it is important to tell them, even though they may resist hearing you, that life - with both its normal transitions and its unexpected challenges - will test their commitment. A wedding centers around the public promise and covenant before God to act lovingly “for better and for worse,” even when loving feelings disappear for a time - and to do everything possible to nurture and rekindle those feelings when they fade. “It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 1943, p. 84).

The most important task of marriage preparation may well be to secure the couple's commitment to an ongoing process of personal and relationship growth. Most experts agree that as early as six months after the wedding and at least by the third year of marriage, the brain chemicals stimulated at the beginning of a relationship wear off and daily life stresses may eclipse the initial state of bliss. If the couple experiences the pastor and others in the congregation as supportive, understanding, and capable allies in the building of their marriage, they may more likely participate in marriage education and enrichment experiences and seek assistance in times of marital stress. You will want to share with them the rich array of books and other resources available to help them nurture their relationship, especially programs and groups available in your church and community, while affirming the rich rewards of cultivating a relationship that can withstand storms and come through trials even stronger than before.

The basic United Methodist resource for marriage preparation, *Growing Love in Christian Marriage (3rd Edition)*, includes both a *Couple's Manual* and a *Pastor's Manual* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013). The *Couple's Manual*, by Richard and Joan Hunt, provides information, suggestions, and discussion exercises couples can do on their own, with a counselor or mentor couple or in a group with other couples. Based on 1st Corinthians 13, the *Couple's Edition* focuses

on four vital marriage themes: "Faith Through Covenantal Commitment" (what each person brings to the marriage); "Hope as Vision for Your Journey" (goals, transitions, challenges, and opportunities for growth); "Love Through Daily Caring Relationships" (the couple, their families, and their work); and "Power Through Shared Communication" (basic skills for communication in marriage). More than sixty "Explore" guides and a "Marriage Lifestyle Questionnaire" help couples identify strengths and areas for growth. The *Growing Love in Christian Marriage Pastor's Manual*, by Jane P. and S. Clifton Ives, provides directions for administering and interpreting the "Marriage Lifestyle Questionnaire" (or other inventory) and additional helps for pre-marital counseling, as well as directions for developing a church marriage policy, establishing a mentor couple ministry, and providing relationship education for all ages and stages of family life.

An annotated list of additional resources at the back of the *Pastor's Manual* describes a number of books, programs, curriculum materials, and organizations which can make your marriage preparation ministry more effective. Here – and in expanded and updated "best practices articles" and resource lists posted at the websites described in the last paragraph below – you will find a variety of easy-to-use study guides and video-based curriculum kits for use by individual couples or in group sessions. You will find contact information for Engaged Encounter United Methodist's weekend retreats (www.encounter.org), and for Imago (www.gettingtheloveyouwant.com) and Better Marriages (www.bettermarriages.com), which provide training in dialogue models you can use to coach couples through discussion of issues that arise. You can share books recommended by other United Methodists for couples to read on their own or as the basis for a group study. *Take Back Your Wedding*, for example, addresses both the couple and extended family dynamics of wedding planning, with guidance for addressing issues in ways that lead to healthy relationships (www.firstdance.com). Several curriculum packages provide excellent frameworks for mentor couple ministries, and you can choose from several different premarital inventories for assessing couples' strengths and areas in which they need to grow. Some resources specifically address the needs of couples who have been cohabiting, who come from different faiths and cultures, or who are remarrying and establishing stepfamilies. Several books and a unique card-sorting activity called *Money Habitudes* (www.moneyhabitudes.com) target those for whom money conflicts are likely because of their dissimilar family experiences and personal financial habits. *Opening the Door: A Pastor's Guide to Addressing Domestic Violence in Premarital Counseling*, by Susan Yarrow Morris, will help you identify and deal with unhealthy behavior patterns.

The lists in the back of the *Pastor's Manual* and a variety of documents posted at www.marriagelovepower.net (click on Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources) and at <http://www.gbod.org/leadership-resources/marriage-family-ministries> (search by topic or title) also suggest resources for strengthening marriage and family ministries by providing relationship education for children, youth, and young adults; marriage education and enrichment; and ministries with those in crisis, transition, and special circumstances. Developing a "marriage-friendly" church culture will enhance your efforts to prepare couples for healthy, lifelong marriages and to nurture them through both predictable life stages and the unexpected challenges they will likely encounter.

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