

Ministering With Those on the Brink of Divorce

Even if your church provides excellent marriage preparation, education, and enrichment ministries, you will still probably encounter couples who find themselves in such painful crisis that at least one of them is considering divorce. William Doherty, PhD., Director of the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project at the University of Minnesota, reports on a newly-developed method for responding effectively to such situations, especially with “mixed agenda” couples, where one party wants to save the marriage and the other does not – or is not sure. This protocol, called “Discernment Counseling,” would be especially useful for pastors, other church leaders, and counselors who observe symptoms of marital crisis or who are approached by an individual or couple considering divorce.

In a 2012 web article titled “Working with Ambivalent Couples on the Brink of Divorce,” Dr. Doherty outlines specific steps, starting with an “intake conversation.” Doherty recommends speaking by phone with one party in order to briefly assess the nature of the crisis and to test out the possibility of scheduling a meeting with both of them. It will be easier for the other party to agree to come in for a visit if the first person has not already established an alliance with the pastor or counselor. This initial conversation is designed to determine where the couple is on the road to divorce (considering, filing, already in process), who is “leaning in” and who is “leaning out” of the marriage, and what the primary issues appear to be. The pastor then requests a meeting with both parties, unless there are indicators of physical and/or emotional abuse. In that case, safety becomes the first priority. (See “Shedding Light on Domestic Violence” under “Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources” and “Ministering with Those in Crisis, Transition, and Special Situations” at www.marriagelovepower.net or search by title or topic at www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries).

Doherty then spells out a specific, research-tested series of questions to ask the couple, leading toward an invitation to set aside the divorce plans and concentrate on reconciliation for a trial period of six months, after which they can decide whether to proceed toward divorce or continue attempts to reconcile. Doherty also outlines separate sessions with each individual and a second couple session during which they may decide whether to participate in the trial reconciliation or continue Discernment Counseling. By not pressing for an immediate decision and by spending ample time with each individual, the pastor or counselor will hopefully establish a supportive relationship with both parties, regardless of their final decision about the marriage, enabling him or her to minister with them effectively as they move on either separately or together. Even pastors/counselors with a bias toward saving the marriage, if at all possible, can convey non-judgmental compassion, affirm God’s grace, and avoid making the couple feel worse than they already do.

If the couple does commit to a six-month all-out effort to reconcile, Doherty recommends certified Discernment Counselors (<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/fsos/projects/mcb/dcdirectory.asp>) or “Marriage Friendly” therapists (www.marriagefriendlytherapists.com). He offers a five-hour video-based training at <http://www.drbilldoherty.org/couplesonthebrink.php>, completion of

which can lead toward certification and listing in the directory referenced above. Hopefully Discernment Counseling training will become even more readily available as church leaders, seminaries, counselors, and lay persons become aware of the healing power of this process, which slows down the rapidly-moving “train” on which couples may find themselves once they have broached the possibility of divorce. Doherty also cautions that couples who claim to have tried marriage counseling may well have participated in processes that have not been shown to be helpful. Some self-described marriage counselors may even do more harm than good. The Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project offers a better way. You can contact them to learn more by email (<mailto:brink@umn.edu>), by phone (612-625-4752 ext. 2), or through the website (<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/fsos/projects/mcb/training.asp>).

Other resources for couples willing to pursue reconciliation are described below and in articles addressing specific issues under “Ministering with Those in Crisis and Transition” at www.marriagelovepower.net or search by title or topic at www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries. Find guidance for ministering with those who decide to proceed toward divorce or who have already done so in the article “Divorce Care and Recovery” posted at the above websites.

RESOURCES FOR MINISTERING WITH COUPLES ON THE BRINK OF DIVORCE

Reading List for Couples

Curriculum, Organizations, and Events

Resources for Pastors and Counselors

Reading List for Couples on the Brink of Divorce

(See also “Marriage Education and Enrichment Reading List for Couples” in the “Marriage Education and Enrichment” of “Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources” and other articles under “Ministering With Those in Crisis and Transition” for books addressing specific marital issues. (Search for these by topic or title at www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries).

Desperate Marriages: Moving Toward Hope and Healing in Your Relationship, by Gary Chapman (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2008). Dr. Chapman bases this work on “Six Principles of Reality Living”: 1) I am responsible for my attitude; 2) My attitude affects my actions; 3) I cannot change other people, but I can influence them, especially by understanding the needs that motivate their behavior; 4) Rather than letting my emotions control my behavior, possibly making things worse, I need to choose words and actions more likely to get the results I want; 5) Behavior is motivated by needs; 6) If I understand other people's needs, I can look for better ways to help them meet those needs and meet my own as well. Much of our behavior is driven by universal needs: to love and be loved; to experience freedom and autonomy; to know that our lives matter; to participate in recreation and other renewing activities; and to feel at peace with God. When we understand the goals driving the behavior of others, we can change our thinking about those behaviors and practice loving actions instead. By discovering and

honoring the unmet needs driving both your partner's behavior and your own, you can reduce conflict and reactivity. After several chapters explaining these concepts, Dr. Chapman applies them to some specific situations, such as infidelity, domestic violence, depression, and addictions - including pornography. He teaches couples to communicate in ways that increase understanding and connection. By receiving each other's words as information, not something to be challenged, we can avoid arguments over who is right and who is wrong. The information in this book would probably enhance any relationship, not just that of those in crisis.

Divorce Busting: A Step-by-Step Approach to Making Your Marriage Loving Again, by Michele Weiner-Davis (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992). The practical problem-solving approach in this book demonstrates how behavior change, even by just one partner, can improve the dynamics of a marriage relationship. The author's emphasis on finding solutions rather than exploring problems is based on a simple formula: "do more of what works and less of what doesn't." (page 17) Whether the marriage can be saved or not, such healthy self-examination and change will likely lead to personal growth.

How One of You Can Bring the Two of You Together: Breakthrough Strategies to Resolve Your Conflicts and Reignite Your Love, by Susan Page (NY: Broadway Books, 1997). The author's insights and suggestions will help both those who feel stuck and frustrated with their relationships and those who, although happy and stable, feel some disillusionment or lack of connection. Page presents a series of "experiments" one person can use, based on 8 specific principles: 1) Act on your own. 2) Do the opposite of what you have been doing. 3) Reframe a power struggle. 4) Enlist your partner's help. 5) Express empathy for your partner's position. 6) Gracefully accept what you can't change. 7) Ask for what you want. 8) Men: tune in; Women: stop coaching. Detailed analysis and examples make this approach clearly understandable.

If We're So in Love, Why Aren't We Happy? Using Spiritual Principles to Solve Real Problems and Restore Your Passion, by Susan Page (New York: Harmony Books, 2002) The author encourages individuals and couples to treat their relationships as spiritual disciplines, practicing acceptance, compassion, restraint, and kindness. By focusing on loving each other, in a spirit of good will, couples can build a true spiritual partnership. The author's insights and "experiments" can be utilized by both or by just one party in the relationship.

Relationship Rescue: A Seven-step Strategy for Reconnecting With Your Partner, by Phillip C. McGraw (New York: Hyperion, 2000). The author helps readers understand how they contribute to the problems in their relationships and lays out clear strategies for getting a marriage back on track: 1) defining and diagnosing your relationship as it is now; 2) getting rid of wrong thinking (myths about marriage); 3) confronting your own negative attitudes and behaviors and ways you do harm to your relationship; 4) internalizing a new set of "Personal Relationship Values;" 5) learning how to make your needs known effectively and discovering the needs of your spouse;

6) reconnecting with your spouse; and 7) managing and maintaining your relationship. Although most of the book is written in secular language, near the end the author expresses his faith in God and in Biblical teachings on relationships. Except in the case of abusive relationships, he asserts “I do not believe that you can reject and criticize your mate and at the same time accept God and his will for your life....I believe that your partner may well be weak where you are strong, and have flaws and fallacies that inspire the best of who you are.” (page 244-246) The exercises in this book could be done by a person alone, but would work well with small groups or with individual coaching.

The Divorce Remedy: The Proven 7-Step Program for Saving Your Marriage, by Michele Weiner Davis (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001). Written in a straightforward, personal manner, this book offers clear steps, encouragement, and hope for persons on the brink of divorce. The author lays out strategies that can be implemented by one partner in the marriage, even if the other shows no interest in working on the relationship. Focusing on one’s self and taking responsibility for one’s own attitudes and behavior helps persons feel better about themselves, regardless of the outcome for the relationship. Even happily married couples might learn from this book some steps they could take to fine-tune their relationships!

The Love Dare by Stephen Kendrick and Alan Kendrick (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2008). Based on the book featured in the movie *Fireproof*, this book offers forty days of faith-based relationship information and challenges to be used by a spouse hoping to improve his or her marriage.

Thinking Divorce? Think Again: 7 Realities You Need to Know, by Lorie D. Fowlke (Fowlken Press, 2004). The author, a divorce lawyer, states that although she has dealt with cases in which divorce was obviously the only appropriate course of action, she has seen many other couples who could have salvaged their families if they had “...directed the time, money and energy they spent on divorce litigation toward re-establishing their relationship and saving their marriage...” She spells out and presents case studies to illustrate the effects of divorce on couples’ finances, lifestyle, employment, children, extended family, and society in general. She concludes, “...if you now think divorce could be a devastating upheaval that may not bring you the joy, peace, or relief that you are seeking, keep thinking.” (p. 99) Visit www.thinkingdivorce.com to order the book and DVD and to download a Divorce Quiz, a Children’s Bill of Rights, Divorce Resources, and a document describing Alternatives to Divorce Litigation.

Yes, Your Marriage Can Be Saved: Twelve Truths for Rescuing Your Relationship, by Joe and Michelle Williams (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2007). Sharing openly their own experience of a very rocky marriage, the authors describe what they learned and how they changed over time. They now lead a marriage reconciliation ministry (Marriage 911). The twelve chapters include discussion questions and insights about how the church can help struggling couples, especially by providing same-gender support groups and partners.

Curriculum, Organizations, and Events for Couples on the Brink of Divorce

(See also “Marriage Education and Enrichment Organizations and Websites” under “Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources” and other articles addressing specific marital issues under “Ministering With Those in Crisis and Transition” at www.marriagelovepower.net or search by title or topic at www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries).

Before You Divorce (Choosing Wisely Before You Divorce), Church Initiative, P.O. Box 1739, Wake Forest, NC 27588-1739, 800-489-7778, Churchmail1@aol.com, www.divorcecare.org. This marriage crisis counseling resource is designed to help couples considering separation or divorce to reconsider their decision and redirect their efforts toward restoring their marriage. The five video sessions show the spiritual, physical, emotional, and financial impact of divorce on families and on children in particular. It does not try to address the underlying problems of the marriage, but attempts to stop the rapid momentum that develops when a couple begins to consider divorce. The couple’s kit includes video sessions, two participant workbooks, and a facilitator’s guide. The ministry edition provides video sessions, six participant workbooks, and a facilitator’s guide with enough material for counseling with three couples

A New Beginning: A Seminar for Marriages in Crisis (Family Dynamics Institute (www.familydynamics.net click on Programs, then on A New Beginning). This is an intensive weekend designed to turn marriages around, stop the hurt, and rekindle the love of couples who are in crisis or ambivalent about their relationship. The website offers an evaluation test couples can use to determine the appropriateness of this program for them. Call 800-650-9995 for more information.

Marriage 911: First Response, by Joe and Michelle Williams and the National Institute of Marriage (2007), joeandmichelle@marriage911.com, www.marriage911online.com. This Christ-centered program provides resources helpful for persons in crisis marriages – whether or not the person’s spouse is willing to work on healing the relationship. The *Marriage 911 12-Week Workbook* provides clear steps for individuals to follow while working with an accountability partner, who uses the *Support Partner Handbook*. The exercises help persons shift their focus from their crisis to Christ and learn new ways of expressing their emotions. *The Marriage 911 First Aid Kit* includes the workbook, handbook, DVDs for use by individuals or by leaders for a 13-week class, and a copy of Joe and Michelle’s book *Yes, Your Marriage Can Be Saved* (Carol Stream, IL: Focus on the Family/Tyndale House, 2007). Leaders will come to your church for a weekend to help set up your Marriage 911 Ministry, asking only for travel expenses, a love offering, and opportunity to sell their books.

Retrouvaille: A Lifeline for Troubled Marriages. This Christian peer ministry begins with a weekend retreat in which husbands and wives are helped to re-establish communication and gain

new understanding of themselves and each other. The presenting couples share their stories of pain, reconciliation, and healing. Participants are not asked to share publicly in this setting, but learn tools and receive encouragement to rediscover each other and rebuild their relationship. Follow-up sessions provide continuing support. Couples who have experienced healing through *Retrouvaille* could, with training, serve as mentors for other couples in crisis. [Call 1-800-470-2230 or visit www.retrouvaille.org for schedules and location of retreats.]

Soul Healing Love – Turning Relationships That Hurt into Relationships That Heal - Couples Toolkit, by Tom and Beverly Rodgers (Charlotte, NC: The Institute for Soul Healing Love). A 2.5 hour DVD and two workbooks provide insights and activities for a couple who want to work on their marriage or for a counselor who wants to work with a couple or group of couples. The Rodgers share out of their own experience and offer sound insights on the normal stage of love relationships, concepts of soul healing love (soul wounds, reactivity, intentionality), digging deeper to understand our reactivity, and Imago (our subconscious image of how relationships should be). Several unique exercises help couples break through their patterns and habitual responses to deeper understanding and love.

The Third Option (Syracuse, NY: Family Life Education, Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse, 2005). 85 Fay Road, Syracuse, NY 13219. Contact Pat Ennis at (315) 472-6728 or pat@thethirdoption.com, or visit www.thethirdoption.com. This on-going program of peer ministry and relationship education combines three dynamics: a support group, “sharing” couples, and workshops on relationship skills. The first hour of the weekly (or bi-weekly) meeting offers orientation for newcomers and support group sharing for those already in the program. The second hour offers a 30-minute workshop on one of fourteen topics, which continually recycle so that participants can come in at any time. The Third Option Manual, which contains the complete program and all needed materials, is sold only to non-profit organizations willing to offer this program free to the public. A staff person or volunteer with organizational, leadership, and relationship skills could establish and run this program in about six hours a week for the first year, three hours a week thereafter. A professional counselor should be available for occasional screening of “sharing couples” and consultation as needed. The program comes in three versions: Christian, Catholic, and secular, and although the manual is in English, Spanish worksheets and brochures make it possible for a bi-lingual leader to offer the program in Spanish.

Resources for Pastors and Counselors Working with Couples on the Brink of Divorce

Counseling Couples in Conflict: A Relational Restoration Model, by James N. Sells and Mark A. Yarhouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011). In this comprehensive resource for pastors and counselors, the authors integrate biblical principles, counseling skills, and theory to

provide helpful understanding of marital conflict in general and in regard to such specific issues as addictions, sexual differences, infidelity, divorce, and blended families.

The Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project offers information about and training in the Discernment Counseling model described in the article above. Email brink@umn.edu, phone 612-625-4752 ext. 2), or visit <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/fsos/projects/mcb/training.asp>).

“Treating Mixed Agenda Couples” by William Doherty, Ph.D, March/April 2012 <http://www.camft.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home&ContentID=12140&template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm>

“Working with Ambivalent Couples on the Brink of Divorce,” by William J. Doherty (University of Minnesota) <http://www.couplesconference.com/CC2011/download/CC11%20-%20William%20Doherty/william-doherty-WS14.pdf>

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