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# Building a Thriving Church Marriage Ministry

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*“As go marriages so go families; as go families so go churches;  
as go churches so go communities; as go communities so go states;  
as go states so go nations; as go nations so go entire civilizations.”*

(Gary J. Oliver, Ph.D.)

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ISBN: 9781624057465

Printed in the United States of America

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As a pastor, you're probably familiar with the famous marriage scene from the film *The Princess Bride*.

On Princess Buttercup's solemn wedding day, we are introduced to the officiating bishop, known as "[The Impressive Clergyman](#)," with his memorable opening address:

*"Mawage. Mawage is wot bwings us togeder tooday. Mawage, that bwessed awangment, that dweam wifin a dweam...."*

Of course, what makes this so funny is the seriousness of the moment, on such a special day, juxtaposed with his unexpected speech impediment. The humor is in the surprise.

But surprises in a marriage can be anything but funny, especially if they prove fatal and end in divorce.

Luckily real Christian marriages are immune to divorce. Or are they?

When George Barna's first round of research comparing the divorce rate of non-Christians to Evangelical Christians suggested that there was no significant difference between the two groups many Christians were dismayed.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after the results were published the following two headlines appeared on two different liberal websites. The first one read, *Jesus Never Fails . . . Unless You're Married*.

The second said that recent research had proven that, *"Marriages that pray together DON'T stay together!"*

Ugh! What an indictment to our claim that Jesus is *the* way and that He makes a difference in our relationships. So what knocked us off course?

Pastors know that the most effective tools for the transformation of a community are healthy churches and healthy marriages, and the surprising reality is that you can't have one without the other.

If we believe that impacting our generation through our churches and their godly marriages is critical, and most pastors whole-heartedly agree, then churches

should take an active part in helping marriages be an example to the world of Christ and His bride, the Church.

It makes perfect sense, but is a marriage ministry a genuine priority in your church? Does marriage truly matter (in the honest indicator of how much time and money is spent on it)? Or is it an inconvenience, even the ceremony itself upsetting your mega-church week-end programs?

Consider Pastor Ted Cunningham's wedding story about his mega-church priorities:

*We have a greeting card that we've designed, and we have 12 different cards coming out soon. We call it "The More Than Wine" card. On the front, it has the Song of Solomon 1:4, "We rejoice and delight in you, we will praise your love more than wine."*

*And on the inside it says, "I desire to bless your marriage by speaking words of high value over both of you. Your marriage is important to me." (Also on the inside) "I rejoice, I delight, I praise." So now, when you come to a wedding at [Woodland Hills](#), or a wedding that I do or any of our pastors does, everyone who comes to the wedding gets this card in an envelope.*

*At the "Welcome," I move the bride and groom to the side and let them just take in the day and the moment while I talk to family and friends and I ask them throughout the day to fill out this card and rejoice in the light and praise and the love of this couple.*

*And I say, "There are three ways to use this card. Many of you will fill this out today and put it into the "More Than Wine" box in the Reception Hall. And during the first year, the couple's going to reach into the box and pull out cards all during the year and be encouraged. The second group of you I want you to "Hold It" until their first anniversary, and then give it to them. (And then, this is the one that I love.)*

*There's a third group of you in here: this is the parents, the grandparents, the bridesmaids, the*

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*groomsmen, and maybe 50-60 more of you. We want you to hold this card until you hear that this couple is going through a difficult time, separating or divorcing. And then I look over at the couple and ask them, "Do we have your permission to send you a hundred of these cards when we hear there's trouble?" And I make them give me an audible answer. (Similar to when you're on the exit aisle of an airplane, they make you give them an audible reply, not just a "nod."). So we have all of that on tape."*

*People are getting into these cards. And what I'm doing now is handing 12 of these cards that have all the different messaging on them to Mom and Dad and asking them to send one card each month during the first year of your child's new marriage.*

Ted's church values marriage as part of their DNA. If marriage is just lip service in your church culture, and you realize that's not the right priority, then this resource is for you – pastors who agree and want to have a successful thriving marriage ministry in their church, reach married couples, and have an outreach within their community because of it.

Our hope is that this book will also start a paradigm shift of hope for you personally and for your ministry through the importance of marriage, and simultaneously re-igniting the fire in your belly that got you into ministry in the first place—helping folks believe and grow to conform to His image.

## **Marriage & The Church**

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Healthy marriages are absolutely essential for healthy families and help provide a solid foundation for healthy, vital, and vibrant churches that make a generational impact. They are connected, divinely and purposefully intertwined.

And yet, a young couple marrying for the first time today has a lifetime divorce risk of 40-50%.<sup>2</sup> Forty percent of pastors say at least one couple in their church separated or divorced in the past year.<sup>3</sup> This is truly scary when you realize that *your* church is made up of these families.

The average engaged couple spends about 9.8 hours per week over 14 months planning a wedding ceremony that usually takes no more than an hour, to begin a marriage that they hope will last 50 years.<sup>4</sup> They assume that their marriage will automatically work out

without at least the same effort they made preparing for the ceremony.

If you knew you had a 50/50 chance of succeeding at the second most important decision of your entire life, would you hesitate to make those vows before family, friends, and God?

Brimming with powerful passions and faith, the truth is that most couples go through with it and assume that it will all just magically work out. Many think there is actually a guaranteed safety net...the Church.

Unfortunately, the tragic reality is that most churches do very little to intentionally strengthen and equip couples to have Christ-centered, satisfying, and long-lasting marriages...the kind that will be a testimony to who Christ is (John 13:34-35, 17:20-23), to the difference that He can make in a marriage and one that will truly impact this generation for the gospel.

This is not an indictment of the pastor, per se, but a grim reality of the enormous challenges they face with available staff, budgets, ministerial priorities, and the sheer volume of couples that need help.

### **Consider these troubling facts:**

**Fact 1:** 69% of churches do not have an ongoing marriage ministry.<sup>5</sup> For most churches, "family ministry" means programs for the children and youth, and strong marriages are supposed to just "happen" without any intentional care.

**Fact 2:** Comparatively few churches have a comprehensive (8-10 hours) pre-marital program that couples are required to complete before being married in the church.

**Fact 3:** Most mega-churches have 5-10 full-time children and youth pastors, but not even one full-time marriage pastor.

**Fact 4:** Many pastors' own marriages are hurting and they think, "*How can I talk to my congregation about healthy marriages when I don't have a good marriage?*"

**Fact 5:** Many pastors have said, "*I've not been called or trained to be a marriage expert, and I don't know that I have the resources or skills to meaningfully deal with this issue. My time is better spent preparing messages—my job is to preach the Word and save lives!*"

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Currently, the vast majority of churches do not have an effective marriage ministry. What's especially sad is that most pastors have absolutely no idea how failed and mediocre marriages undermine and hinder the ministry and mission of their local church.

While the impact is not always immediate and obvious, nothing can negatively affect your church's ministry and mission, impair and neutralize your leaders, and thwart future growth, more than hurting marriages and divorce.

According to a new research study by Nashville-based LifeWay Research, sponsored by Focus on the Family, when couples divorce, tithing, serving, volunteering, and church attendance significantly decrease. Visible lay leaders have to resign from positions of impact and influence leaving gaps in important church ministries. At the same time, the demand for financial assistance, childcare, and more of your time through pastoral counseling all increase...significantly!

In the end, pastors report being frustrated and even overwhelmed by the number of couples needing assistance and the lack of time they have to help them. Frequently, the knee-jerk reaction is to launch a program or host an event that takes even more time from the pastor's bursting schedule with only minimal results.

There are all kinds of great marriage related resources and programs to help, but if the pastor doesn't recognize the vital and pivotal relationship of healthy marriages to healthy churches then little of any real significance will happen.

Cultivating Christ-centered marriages must be a top priority from the very beginning.

But how does a pastor do that when they don't have time for even one more thing on their overflowing plate?

## THE PLAN: HOW TO BUILD A THRIVING MARRIAGE MINISTRY

### # 1: Create a Vision For Marriage Ministry Based On a Theology of Relationships.

*And the Lord answered me: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it."* (Habakkuk 2:2, ESV)

### Fact: 43% of churches do not have a written plan in place for marriage ministry.<sup>6</sup>

The key to a thriving marriage ministry is not just another parents night out, marriage event, couples' small group or premarital program. *Events* are not the solution. The solution is relationships.

When God made us in His image, He designed us to be relational. As pastors, we need to re-calibrate our thinking about marriage as one of the primary relationships that He will use to "*help us become conformed to the image of His Son*" (Romans 8:29, ESV).

One of the reasons why a marriage ministry may flounder or run off course is that many pastors do programs or events, but they don't start from vision—from a well thought-through and prayed-through theology of relationships.

When Christ was asked about the greatest commandment, what did He say? Look at Mark 12:29-30, where Christ pulls from the Old Testament.

*Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'" (ESV)*

So we are being commanded to have an intimate, growing, passionate relationship with Christ.

Now look at Mark 12:31,

*"The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."* (ESV)

And then over in John 13:34-35, Jesus says, "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*" (ESV).

How do you know if what you're doing is making a difference in your church? In the day-in and day-out lives of your people? It's not by how many programs you offer, how many people you baptize, your attendance, or tithing. It's by how we love one another—this is the true evidence that demonstrates the presence of our living Lord in our lives.

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We had both read John 17:9-11 many times, but one day as we talked about this passage God grabbed our attention as He drew us to His relational imperative:

*I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. (ESV)*

This is astonishing!

Then continuing on in John 17:21, “*that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us...*” (ESV)

And WHY is this so important? Why does this make such a difference? “*I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me*” (John 17:23, ESV).

If indeed “*The goal of our instruction is love*” (1 Timothy 1:5, NASB) then one of the most obvious places for that to be lived out is in the context of our marriages.

Based on the unequivocally clear teaching of Scripture, the primary apologetic for the truth claims of Christ are the way we do relationships, and for most believers the primary relationship God has designed to demonstrate His transforming power is the marriage relationship.

If we can’t help our couples have a Christ-like marriage relationship, how will they ever have healthy Christ-like families? And if we can’t help one couple and one family accomplish this, how can we expect 500 couples and families to show up on Sunday and magically demonstrate Christ-like relationships . . . to listen, to love, to forgive, to honor, serve, nourish, cherish, to manage conflict in healthy ways, to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things and endure all things?

When will the world know that Jesus is who He claimed to be? What does God say is the ultimate evidence that demands a verdict? The only reason Christ gives that the world should believe that He is who He says He is, is by the quality of our relationships. As people see us living, loving, learning and forgiving,

as they see our visible harmony and unity, “*Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*”

Wow. That’s powerful. Why is a theology of relationships so important? Why? “*I in them, and You in Me, that they may be brought to complete unity.*” Why? “*So that the world will know that you sent me.*”

A consistent, committed and visible Christ-like love is the foundational key to a theology of relationships and a long-lasting ministry. In 1 Corinthians 13:1 it says,

*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. (ESV)*

Then Ephesians 5:1-2 says, “*Be imitators of God...*” We are never told in Scripture to be something that we can’t be. In seminary, I (Gary) translated the entire book of Ephesians from Greek to English, but somehow I missed the significant clue as was to what “imitating” God really looks like.

*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (ESV)*

It is not by how much I know, by how much I tithe, by how many verses I memorize, by having the correct eschatological position, by how many bad habits or activities I abstain from. It’s by the visible, costly, Christ-like love that I demonstrate.

Furthermore, in 1 Timothy 1:5 it says, “*The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith*” (NIV).

So the goal of our instruction is love. This is a relational apologetic—built on a sound theology of relationships.

The Great Commission and The Great Commandment are the legs of the Church. Loving one another is how those legs move, and Jesus gave the best advertisement of the importance of the relationship between the bridegroom and the bride (the Church), and marriage is the best billboard of it to the world.

Given the clear teaching of Scripture that healthy relationships are the key, and given the fact that the most significant relationship most people will have is the

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marriage relationship . . . it just makes sense that cultivating healthy Christ-centered marriages would be a critical part of your church's DNA, right? That your church would be in-part defined by healthy marriages, in fact even known in your town as *"The Marriage Church."* The church that causes them to say, *"My, how they love one another."*

It's like Gary Thomas said, *"What if God didn't design marriage to make us happy, but to make us holy?"*<sup>7</sup> The crucible of a Christ-centered marriage refines us in ways that transform us and help us reflect Him to the world, and through it the Great Commandment and the Great Commission are sparked into raging fires.

Marriage goes hand in hand with both of these commandments, and with your passion that got you into ministry initially. Why is that?

Because the ultimate purpose of doing marriage ministry is not merely marriages that last, but a growing Christ-likeness that is seen in the context of a man and a woman who are in love with their Lord and with each other. *"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son..."* (Romans 8:29, ESV). Evidence of us becoming more Christ-like is seen in our growing ability to love others, and especially those closest to us, as Christ loves us.

Consider what C.S. Lewis said about this transformation:

*This is the whole of Christianity. There is nothing else. It is so easy to get muddled about that. It is easy to think that the Church has a lot of different objectives -- education, building, missions, holding services. The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose. It is even doubtful, you know, whether the whole universe was created for any other purpose. It says in the Bible that the whole universe was made for Christ and that everything is to be gathered together in Him.*<sup>8</sup>

I (Gary) have become convinced that, based upon the clear teaching of Scripture, the most powerful evidence for the truth claims of Christ and the ultimate evidence that demands a verdict, are men, women, marriages and families who are "becoming conformed to the image of His Son" and who reflect the quality

of love that our Lord said would be the mark of a Christian in the context of their everyday relationships. Christ said it best in John 13:34-35 when He said that the world will know that we are His disciples by our love.

We are diamonds reflecting His light, and each of us is in the process of having facets carved to reflect more of Him. This is done through relationships, and marriage is the most important crucible for this change to occur. And a lost world is watching us!

Joe Aldrich writes: "The two greatest forces in evangelism are a healthy church and a healthy marriage. The two are interdependent. You can't have one without the other. It is the healthy marriage, however, that is the true 'frontline weapon.' The Christian family in a community is the ultimate evangelistic tool, assuming the home circle is an open one in which the beauty of the gospel is readily available. It's the old story: *When love is seen, the message is heard, or to put it more succinctly... more is caught than taught.*"<sup>9</sup>

Too often marriage ministry has devolved into a routine of events and programs, programs that some hold dear, but it's relationships that matter most and the key relationship is marriage.

A good program should only be an enhancement to relationships. The real anchor is your theology of relationships. This new paradigm shift brings hope because it takes the pressure off of the pastor, unless his own marriage is inadequate, and then that obviously becomes a first priority.

Assuming that it is a priority and gets its due healing attention, then launching a marriage ministry should be an encouragement to every pastor, empowering them to develop a new relationship paradigm for what God has called him to do, and to view marriage ministry as a powerful way to help live out the Great Commandment and The Great Commission.

**Action step:** Write your own vision for marriage ministry that flows from a theology of relationships—not programs or events. Develop a written congregational marriage mission statement.

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## #2: Conduct a Thorough Assessment of Your Church.

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*"Know well the condition of your flocks, and give attention to your herds"* (Proverbs 27:23, ESV).

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**Fact: Most pastors have no idea if the people in their congregation are becoming more like Jesus.**

We regularly go to the doctor to assess our physical health, but how often do we stop and take stock of what's going on in spiritually, emotionally and relationally in our own lives and in the lives of our parishioners?

You spend hours every week preparing and delivering messages and facilitating small groups, but how do you know it is making a meaningful difference in how your people live their lives? How are they growing? How are they changing? How are the quality of their relationships reflecting the presence of Christ in their lives?

If indeed we are to help our people “*grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ*” (Ephesians 4:15, ESV), how do we know where and how that growth is actually taking place?

For most of us it's been a long time since we've taken 30 minutes just to sit and assess the condition of our heart, our walk with the Lord and our relationships—to ask ourselves: “What difference is Christ making day-in and day-out in my life and important relationships?”

**Action Step:** A powerful way to better understand the “condition of your flocks” is to administer the [Church Relationships Assessment](#). The CRA was specifically designed to help church leaders assess the spiritual, emotional and relational condition of their congregation. It is the result of over 20 years of research and development at John Brown University and Denver Seminary. The CRA can be taken by the entire adult congregation—both married and single—and can be taken during a worship service or online. The CRA will give you a comprehensive and clear understanding of the relational state of your congregation, with specific insights on your marriages and what to target within your marriage ministry.

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**#3: Empower a Lay Couple to Lead Your Marriage Ministry.**

“*As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another*” (Proverbs 27:17, NIV).

**Fact: 67% of churches do not have a lay leader responsible for marriage ministry.**<sup>10</sup>

Today's church leaders are faced with unparalleled opportunities for ministry, and frustrated with inadequate staff and no qualified laity to meet those needs. And no need is greater than marriage and family. Research tells us more pastors don't have intentional marriage ministries because of a lack of trained staff to facilitate those programs.

The main job of a pastor is to prepare God's people for works of service, not to do all the works of ministry himself. His job is to teach God's people how to minister to one another.

In other words, the job of the pastor is to make disciples. Pastors do not need to lead a marriage ministry, but it is absolutely essential that they help cast the vision and offer support for strengthening marriage within their church.

You must lead by example and make your own marriage a priority. Show up at significant marriage events with your spouse and sit on the front row. Proclaim the importance of marriage and healthy relationships from the pulpit. Sadly, 29% of pastors preach about marriage once a year or less.<sup>11</sup>

However, one key to building a sustainable marriage ministry is to prayerfully identify one or two couples that have a passion for marriage—we call these couples *Marriage Champions*. Every congregation has at least one couple that is passionate about and wants to help with healthy marriages. Utilize their desire and availability to lead this marriage ministry. They can be a gold mine of wisdom and insight.

These marriage champion couples can then take the leadership torch and train up other couples to act as marriage mentors for your congregation. “*And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also*” (2 Timothy 2:2, ESV).

What makes a good marriage champion couple? Look for these characteristics:

- They have a good marriage (not a “perfect” marriage—no such thing!)
- They consistently “work” on their marriage
- They can communicate effectively
- Others seek them for marital guidance

- They are transparent and are willing to talk about the good, the bad and the ugly in their own marriage
- They have a passion for marriage ministry
- They are spiritually growing
- They are good at meeting people and establishing relationships
- They are consistent in their attendance at church
- They value the power of small group fellowship

These are couples that are growing, transparent, nurturing, and care about people. The goal is to get strong marriages to replicate other strong marriages. Several faces should come to mind right away to pray about approaching. Cast a vision for them to take on this role in your church and see what God will do (for more information about marriage mentors visit [www.focusonthefamily.com/marriagementors](http://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriagementors)).

**Action Step:** Ask one or two “marriage champion”-type of couples to prayerfully consider leading the marriage ministry program at your church. Choosing the right marriage champion couple(s) is the first big step. This creates a solid core group of trained married couples in the church. Focus on the Family has collaborated with Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott to offer a powerful online marriage [mentoring training program](#).

A thriving marriage ministry will take some initial time and work and prayer, but it will grow, and eventually your lay leaders will take it over and thrive as they are able to utilize their spiritual gifts and passion, and the mentored couples they work with will not only have strong marriages and families of their own, but many will become your future leaders. So what’s next?

#### #4: Start a Premarital Program For Engaged Couples.

*“Your job is to speak out on the things that make for solid doctrine. Guide older men into lives of temperance, dignity, and wisdom, into healthy faith, love, and endurance. Guide older women into lives of reverence so they end up as neither gossips nor drunks, but models of goodness. By looking at them, the younger women will know how to love their husbands and children, be virtuous and pure, keep a good house, be good wives. We don’t want anyone looking*

*down on God’s Message because of their behavior. Also, guide the young men to live disciplined lives” (Titus 2:1-6, MSG).*

**Fact: 9 in 10 churches require couples to participate in premarital counseling prior to using the church for a wedding.**<sup>12</sup>

The good news is that almost all weddings occur in a church. Because of this, the church has a unique opportunity to build a relationship with couples that can last throughout their entire marriage.

A comprehensive pre-marital program in your church will strengthen engaged couples before their marriages get in trouble and promote the value of strong, healthy marriages as a keystone of your ministry by their example to your unsaved community.

Premarital education is a great way to deepen a relationship with a couple and can help anchor them to your church.

Make sure you have something for both young, first-time married couples and remarriage couples.

**Action Step:** Create a program for couples interested in serving marriage and engaged couples. The program should provide at least 8-10 hours of education from a mentor couple. Topics should focus on the purpose of marriage, spiritual relationship, commitment, communication, relating with in-laws, sex, finances, and building a community. Then, require that every couple getting married in the church and/or by church staff receive at least 8-10 hours of premarital preparation.

The great news is that pre-marital education works. One research study found that 80% of the couples that did premarital training, stayed together.<sup>13</sup>

If you are looking for a comprehensive, Biblically-based premarital program, Focus on the Family as just released a new DVD curriculum for engaged couples called [Ready To Wed](#). This easy-to-use resource is for those who mentor engaged couples and for pastors/churches who wish to use it for premarital counseling and Christian marriage preparation.

Here is what you’ll receive:

- A Biblically-based, 10-Session DVD Series featuring respected Christian experts
- Dr. Gary Chapman, Dr. Gary Thomas, Dr. Tony

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Evans, Dr. Juli Slattery, Pastor Samuel Rodriguez, and more!

- The humorous and insightful *Ready to Wed* book, co-authored by Dr. Greg and Erin Smalley
- Leader's Guide
- 2 Participant Workbooks
- [Ready to Wed iPhone App](#)

This complete kit is full of tools, tips, and instructions that start a couple on a straight path to a strong Christ-like marriage. From in-laws and finances to intimacy and chores, [Ready to Wed](#) is a great way to help engaged couples plan for all of marriage's joys -- and challenges.

Visit <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/promos/christian-premarital-counseling-kit> for more information.

Premarital couples that have a good experience will be more open to future marriage enrichment programs and more likely to reach out for help when they need it.

### # 5: Launch Marriage Enrichment Activities.

*“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor...though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken”* (Ecclesiastes 4:9,11, NIV). It's a powerful experience when married couples come together to work on their marriage.

**Fact: 75% of pastors believe churches can prevent divorce.**<sup>14</sup>

Marriage enrichment is based on the idea that couples can learn how to build and maintain successful, long-lasting marriages. Again, the great news is that the vast majority of enrichment activities happen within churches (conferences, retreats, classes, small groups). Thus, the Church can help grow strong marriages by offering enrichment opportunities throughout the year.

**Action Step:** Here are some ideas for doing marriage enrichment activities in your church.

- Provide an annual sermon series on marriage. The focus of these messages should be on bibli-

cal teachings and life applications for establishing and enhancing marriage.

- Offer a parents night out program. Use Hebrews 13:4, *“Marriage should be honored by all...”* as a way to encourage the youth group to offer “free” childcare at the church so parents can go out on a date.
- Host at least one marriage enrichment seminar each year. Focus on relationship enhancement, skill development, and spiritual renewal.
- Provide a weekend marriage getaway retreat for couples (a time to get out of town).
- Offer [daily/weekly devotionals](#) for couples on your website.
- Provide service activities that married couples can do together.
- Provide [media resources](#) such as books, magazines, videos, and interactive learning resources. These resources can be checked out and/or purchased.
- Pair up newly married couples with older married couples for the purpose of providing guidance for a period of two years.
- Provide at least one annual Covenant Marriage Commitment service where couples have an opportunity to publicly affirm their marriage as a covenant relationship.
- Celebrate couples that have been married over 50 years.
- Offer regular, ongoing small group or Sunday school classes focused on marriage.
- Start a blended family support system.
- Dedicate resources. Does your church budget, staff time and your calendar reflect your commitment to strong marriages?

While most pastors say their churches offer marriage resources, many couples do not realize help is available. According to the LifeWay study, pastors say their churches offer a wide range of marriage support services, including resources such as books and videos (77 percent) and referrals to professional

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counseling outside the church (75 percent). Many churchgoers, however, seem unaware of the services. Just 38 percent of those in healthy marriages and 21 percent of those who divorced believe their church offers books and videos about marriage.<sup>15</sup> Thus, either pastors are overstating what they're doing or not everybody is noticing what their church is doing. There are clearly gaps in communication when people don't even know help exists.

Make sure your couples are fully aware of the great marriage resources that you offer. However, what should you do *when* a couple comes to you in crisis?

### #6: Provide Meaningful Help for Couples Who Are In Marriage Crisis.

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*"A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity"* (Proverbs 17:17, ESV).

**Fact: 78% of pastors have had at least one couple come to them with serious marriage difficulties in the past year.**<sup>16</sup>

Divorce is the culmination of a great relational loss. But is there a broader cost that impacts the church? The LifeWay research study clearly shows that churchgoing couples that divorce often lead those involved to drop out of church, give less to church, hurt other relationships, and sometimes impact the trajectory of the church.

- 20% of churchgoers who divorced in the last 5 years are not currently attending church at all
- Only half of divorcees (53%) attend the same church they attended prior to the separation.
- 35% of divorcees say that at least one child who attended with them prior to the separation are no longer attending church regularly.
- 32% of divorcees say they give less to their local church than prior to their separation.
- Among those whose giving decreased, the median is a 50% decrease.
- 31% of pastors say a divorce in their church has fractured other relationships
- Almost 1 in 6 pastors say a divorce in their church has created leadership voids (16%)

- About 1 in 10 pastors say a divorce in their church has:
  - Hurt the church's reputation (11%),
  - Stopped the church's momentum (10%), or
  - Disbanded an adult small group or Sunday school class (9%)

With such potential costs to the local church, it is important to note that there may not be outward signs that marital trouble is looming. In fact, churchgoers who divorce can be very active in their local church, thus, the threat of divorce can be very difficult to spot. Three months before their separation, 7 in 10 regular churchgoers—those who attend once a month or more—who divorce are attending church once a week or more. For those in healthy marriages, the rate is 87 percent. The two groups also report similar levels of involvement in small groups at church (46 percent for those who divorce vs. 41 percent for those in healthy marriages), serving in community ministries (34 percent vs. 31 percent), and positions of responsibility at church (39 percent vs. 44 percent). Therefore, do not assume that hurting couples will be easy to spot.

Before a divorce, churchgoers in troubled marriages look a lot like their happily married counterparts at church—participating, serving, and leading at similar rates.

If in the majority of divorces the warning signs are limited in a church setting, then it is imperative that churches create an environment in which couples are willing to voluntarily share that their marriage is in trouble with trusted people within the church.

According to the LifeWay study, nearly 8 in 10 churchgoers—and 94 percent of pastors—say their church is a safe place to talk about marital difficulties.

Experience, however, tells a different story. Among those who divorced, only 48 percent discussed their marriage problems with the lead pastor. Even fewer talked to anyone else, such as another staff member (13 percent) or a member of a small group or Sunday school class (11 percent). Thirty-one percent told no one—a troubling sign of church culture.

Hopefully this will serve as a wake-up call to the church. If we are dogmatic and not realistic about relationships, then those who have trouble in their marriage are never going to tell anybody. First and foremost, we need to make it safe for hurting couples to talk about their problems and reach out for help. This type of culture comes from transparency. Couples need to hear about your marriage struggles.

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Every marriage will face challenges, “*But those who marry will face many troubles in this life...*” (1 Corinthians 7:28, NIV). We need to create a church culture where not only are marriage problems “normal,” but that we can talk about them and get help. People are drawn to real, authentic pastors who admit to their marriage weaknesses and shortcomings, “*But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me*” (2 Corinthians 12:9, ESV). We need more pastors who “boast” about their marriage trials and tribulations, and who point couples to Christ’s power and ever-present help in times of trouble.

One of the more powerful marriage seminars that I (Greg) have been a part of happened in Dallas, Texas. Just before my wife, Erin, and I were introduced to start the event, the senior pastor walked up to the podium.

“Have y’all seen my wife?” he asked.

Everyone looked around and nervously chuckled at his question.

“Seriously,” he asked again, “have you seen my wife?”

But this time, before anyone could respond, he stated, “She isn’t here because we had a huge fight last night. And honestly, she didn’t want to attend a ‘marriage’ seminar when we’re still not speaking to each other!”

Laughter erupted around the room. I gave Erin the look that communicated, “Where is this going?”

“I’m just being honest,” the pastor continued, “And I felt that I needed to share where we are at this morning in our marriage. We’ll be okay...after I apologize...but right now we’re hurting.”

The pastor then asked if anyone else was currently in a fight with their spouse. I was shocked at how many hands went up around the room. He told them to stand up with their spouse. He then encouraged any couple that had been through infidelity, in-law trouble, conflict, financial problems, infertility, job-loss, death, problems with children, pornography, lying, etc. to stand up as well. Literally, the entire room was now standing.

The pastor then invited the marriage team to spread

out amongst the couples and for the next fifteen minutes he passionately prayed for these couples. When he was done you could hear the sniffing and coughing as we all tried to regain composure and dry our tear-soaked eyes. It was the most powerful first 30 minutes of a marriage seminar that I’ve ever experienced.

The best part was watching his wife appear. Apparently she had been “hiding” in the back and joined him on stage. He dropped down on one knee and apologized. She gave him the biggest hug and kiss that I’ve ever seen in a church!

This moving experience happened because the pastor was willing to be transparent and real. And you can create that same culture within your church!

The good news is that when couples are hurting they are more likely to seek out a pastor than a counselor. The key is to help the church staff understand how to be a part of the restoration process and then when to refer.

The great news is that marriages can survive very difficult seasons:

- 66% of unhappy couples that stayed married were happier 5 years later.<sup>17</sup>
- 40% of divorced people regretted their divorce and thought it was preventable.<sup>18</sup>

A church can help a couple in crisis by doing the following:

- Commit to being a prayer warrior for the couple.
- Be transparent about your own marriage struggles from the pulpit. When people know that your marriage isn’t perfect they feel safe to seek out help.
- Allow couples who’ve been through difficult times and who are now thriving to share their testimony from the pulpit.
- Develop both internal and external support systems for help. Internally, use your mentor couples to provide support for the couple in crisis—especially a mentor couple that have been through tough times in their marriage. Mentor couples are great at supporting, empathizing, encouraging, and praying with and for the hurting couple. They also can help fight for their marriage. But the mentor couple cannot be the only source of help.

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The hurting couple also needs to be working with a counselor. This is the perfect support system for the couple—a mentor couple and a counselor. Therefore, externally, develop a counselor referral by identifying the best Christian counselors in your area. Focus on the Family provides a counselor and has an extensive national referral list of Christian counselors. Each counselor on the list is licensed as a mental health professional in the state where he or she practices and has completed an application that has been reviewed by a Focus counselor. Anyone may arrange to speak with a licensed Christian counselor at no cost by calling 1-855-771-HELP (4357) Monday through Friday between 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. Mountain time or visit <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/coun-seling/find-a-counselor.aspx>.

- Encourage the couple to attend a specialized marriage intensive counseling program. Focus on the Family's Hope Restored (HR) utilizes a format called Marriage Intensives. These marriage intensive counseling programs are like "marriage ER." We hear many testimonies from couples whose relationships were literally on the ropes—they were headed for divorce court. But at that moment of crisis, our team at HR was able to help them turn things around and start down the road to healing and restoration. Since 2003, HR has helped more than 3,000 couples from all 50 states and over 20 countries. HR has a main campus in Branson, MO and they also do intensives at WinShape Marriage in Rome, GA. Research shows that 85% of couples remain married after 2 years. For more information visit [HopeRestored.com](http://HopeRestored.com) or call (866) 875-2915.
- Start a divorce care program.

In conclusion, we know that marriage is important to God, and that He hates divorce:

*God, not you, made marriage. His Spirit inhabits even the smallest details of marriage. And what does he want from marriage? Children of God, that's what. So guard the spirit of marriage within you. Don't cheat on your spouse.*

*"I hate divorce," says the God of Israel. God-of-the-Angel-Armies says, "I hate the violent dismembering of the 'one flesh' of marriage." So watch yourselves. Don't let your guard down. Don't cheat. (Malachi 2:15-16, MSG)*

The Scriptures begin with a wedding and end with a wedding. The metaphor of a bride and groom is used to describe the relationship between Christ and the Church. In short, marriage matters to God.

Our hope is that your church becomes a place where marriages matter because lives are changed in them, and that fulfills the two greatest commands as they are lived out in the community.

The destructive result of divorce, co-habitation, and out-of-wedlock childbearing has been devastating and is leading to the collapse of the American family, as we know it. This devastation is clearly undermining the very foundation and fabric of our society, and those hurting families are dying to see a marriage work... and may come to your church because of it. Not only are marriages the cornerstone of our society, but they are essential for healthy families and foundational for healthy churches. The reality is that you can't have a healthy church with a long-lasting ministry that doesn't have couples with healthy, vibrant, and growing marriages.

Since clergy performs the majority of all marriages, we are in a unique position to dramatically influence the marriages and families in our community, initially and afterward. A number of years ago, I (Greg) remember Rick Warren talked about his "Peace Plan" for medical care in western Rwanda. His plan was to see that everyone received medical care in western Rwanda. He showed a map of western Rwanda, and a few dots showed up on the map that represented hospitals, then he explained the small number of doctors and health clinics. Just a scattering of dots, and then he showed an impressive amount of dots which represented all the churches in the area. Through this, he explained how medical care is not going to come through the hospitals and doctors, but through the churches as distributors. As I sat there and watched that, I felt the same about marriage ministry: *the church should be the number one distribution center for healthy marriages within this country because of its unique role... 80% of marriages began in one of them.*<sup>19</sup>

Pastors need to recognize their unique position and be committed to strengthening and nourishing those married couples that look to us for spiritual instruction and guidance. They are a priority.

And to educate and equip pre-marital couples with the tools needed for a Christ-like marriage, enrich and strengthen existing marriages, minister more effectively to those couples who are experiencing marital diffi-

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culties or divorce, and to help individuals and couples establish spiritually and emotionally healthy families.

Marriages are the cornerstone of our society, and critical for healthy families and foundational for healthy churches who want to impact their generation.

But it isn't about marriage; it's about a relational God creating us in His image to reflect the truth of who He is as a relational Being of love. At the end of the day, that's how people will know Christ by the way we love one another.

Marriage is one of the best relationships that God uses to accomplish that and it is supremely important. Healthy churches will happen because we have healthy marriages and healthy families and the ripple effect that that can create.

At the end of the day, as a pastor you should feel that sense of exhaling because you're back on course to that original calling, re-ignited within the context of this new paradigm and able to say, *"Alright, there are some things that I can do. And thank you, because it's not all on my shoulders. Now, I've got some work to do. How do I articulate what I just got so excited about, and what is my theology about relationships, and God, who are you raising up to carry this torch within our church?"*

This is not a new thing to add to your load, or to add on to the "three things" in your church mission statement or to supplant a ministry you are excelling at... this is the core of all of that, a reminder that Romans 8:29 is why you got into ministry in the first place, and marriage is a key to that transformation.

Just like Nehemiah who took the long-term view when building the wall to protect Jerusalem, as a pastor you need to realize you'll be laying a foundation that will take some time initially, but eventually others will build upon it.

Nehemiah spent 52 days building the wall because *"the people worked with all their heart (Nehemiah 4:6, NIV)."*

In the same way, beginning a marriage ministry will take some work initially, but it will eventually be your lay leaders who will take it over, and the mentored couples they work with may be your future leaders too.

Tim Popadic, former pastor and creator of [Date Night Comedy Tour](#) shares a great story about what a marriage ministry can mean to your foundation long-term.

*After years of doing marriage ministry in our church in Connecticut, we headed back this summer to reconnect with our old church. It was now 15 years later and we were stunned to see some of the same couples we took through our prep class 15 years before who were now in the top leadership of the church!*

*I asked Tom and Lisa why they were serving in this position and they said it was because the church invested in them when they needed it the most, and they had always been grateful and continued to have a sense of obligation to give back. (We are talking about a 10-week investment with a 15-year return).*

*"When the church stepped up to meet us in that time of our greatest need, we felt cared for and shepherded by the church which created an incredible state of loyalty. We love our church and we love it because it's a place for us to serve together."*

Wisdom is knowledge applied in such a way that, like a sharp axe, the work is easier to perform. Our goal is to provide you with enough "sharp" tools that you can easily make a marriage ministry a success in your church over the long-term.

So what's one practical step you can make right now to move you back to God's calling with a marriage ministry priority? Consider these practical suggestions:

- Take a Saturday to discuss Relationship Theology with your staff.
- Cast some vision for pro-active marriage initiatives in your church.
- Pray about three couples to approach to be your first lay leaders.
- Evaluate where marriage is in your church's priorities (time, money, resources).

The journey out of the woods to get "unlost" begins with one step. And remember, the most powerful evangelistic tool for the truth claims of Christ is relationships. We want to end with a great quote by pastor Jess C. Moody,

*We will win the world when we realize that fellowship, not evangelism, must be our primary emphasis. When we demonstrate that Big Miracle*

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*of Love, it won't be necessary for us to go out,  
they will come in.*

*This will eliminate our pathetic reliance upon  
preaching to win people. Flapping jawbones, the  
perpetual motion machines upon which we have  
too long relied, have done nothing but generate  
cyclones.*

*Men aren't won by wind. They are won by seeing  
the reality of the Person of Jesus Christ.*

*It is my belief that it is almost impossible to reject  
Christ—if He is seen as He really is.*

*If the Christian public can convince the world  
that in this age of duplicity, doubledealing and  
dishonesty, there is one body of people who can  
be trusted, where mutual respect is a daily reality,  
and there is real honest fun among them; if, I say,  
this can be solidly conveyed to the world, mass  
evangelism of the proportion of Pentecost will be  
the result.*

*People don't go to where the action is; they go to  
where LOVE is.*

May the Lord bless you and protect you.  
May the Lord smile on you and be gracious to you.  
May the Lord show you his favor and give you his  
peace.

Gary J. Oliver  
Greg Smalley

[Gary Oliver](#), M.Div., Th.M., Ph.D.

Dr. Gary J. Oliver is a father, university and seminary professor, psychologist, author, Executive Director of the Center for Relationship Enrichment and Professor of Psychology and Practical Theology at John Brown University in Siloam Springs, Arkansas.

He received his B.A. from Biola University, an M.Div. from Talbot Theological Seminary, a Th.M. from Fuller Theological Seminary, and an M.A. and a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. He is a licensed clinical psychologist in both Arkansas and Colorado. Dr. Oliver is a Clinical Member and Approved Supervisor of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT). He has earned the Certified Family Life Educator (C.F.L.E.) diploma by The National Council on Family Relations.

Dr. Oliver has over 30 years experience in individual, premarital, marital and family counseling. For several years he worked as senior psychologist with a group of family practice physicians and for over 12 years he was Clinical Director of a large non-profit counseling center in Littleton, Colorado. For the past 25 years he has had an extensive nationwide teaching ministry. He has founded, developed and directed several counseling centers. He served on the Executive Board and the national speaking team of Promise Keepers and is on the Executive Board of the American Association of Christian Counselors.

In addition to his clinical experience, Dr. Oliver has over ten years experience serving on the staff of churches in California, Nebraska and Colorado. He is also the founder of and professor in the D. Min. in Marriage and Family Counseling Program at Denver Seminary. For the past several years Dr. Oliver has been included in Who's Who in America.

He has authored or co-authored over 20 books including *Mad About Us: Moving from Anger to Intimacy with Your Spouse*, published by Bethany House and *Raising Sons and Loving It!*, published by Zondervan. He is also the co-author of ten books with H. Norman Wright including *Fears, Doubts, Blues and Pouts* published by Victor Books and *A Woman's Forbidden Emotion* published by Regal Books, as well as over 150 articles in national magazines and journals. For several years Dr. Oliver served as editor of *Marriage and Family: A Christian Journal* and contributes a regular column in *Home Life* magazine.

Dr. Oliver travels both nationally and internationally providing his Emotional and Relational Intelligence (ERQ™) workshops, Growth-Focused™ Marriage Enrichment Seminars as well as seminars and workshops on a variety of relationship-related topics. He resides in Siloam Springs, Arkansas with his wife, Linda.

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[Greg Smalley](#), M.A., Psy.D.

Dr. Greg Smalley serves as the vice president of Marriage & Family Formation at Focus on the Family. In this role, he develops and oversees initiatives that prepare individuals for marriage, strengthen and nurture existing marriages and help couples in marital crises.

Prior to joining Focus, Smalley worked for the Center for Healthy Relationships at John Brown University and as President of the National Institute of Marriage. He is the author of thirteen books including “Crazy Little Thing Called Marriage,” “Fight Your Way to a Better Marriage,” “The DNA of Relationships,” “The DNA of Parent and Teen Relationships,” and “The Whole-Hearted Marriage”.

Smalley’s passion for marriage began as a young boy. He is the son of Dr. Gary Smalley, a family counselor, president and founder of the Smalley Relationship Center and author of 40 books on marriage. Smalley regularly attended his father’s conferences and absorbed the importance of marriage. He frequently had people come up to him at events and say, “Your dad saved my marriage.” Smalley knew early in his career that he wanted to be more hands-on in helping couples. After receiving his doctorate at the Rosemead School of Psychology at Biola University in Southern California and a counseling degree from Denver Seminary, he and his wife, Erin, led marriage seminars around the world and trained pastors, professionals and lay leaders on how to effectively work with married and engaged couples.

Married since 1992, Greg and Erin live in Colorado with their three daughters, Taylor, Maddy and Annie, and their son, Garrison.

#### (ENDNOTES)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.barna.org/component/content/article/5-barna-update/45-barna-update-sp-657/194-born-again-christians-just-as-likely-to-divorce-as-are-non-christians#.VkPR90uGUR4>

<sup>2</sup> <http://family-studies.org/what-is-the-divorce-rate-anyway-around-42-percent-one-scholar-believes/>

<sup>3</sup> 2015 research study by Nashville-based LifeWay Research. The study, sponsored by Focus on the Family, surveyed 1,000 Protestant pastors, churchgoing Americans in healthy marriages, and 1,000 churchgoing Americans who divorced in the past five years.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/2010/07/22/wedding-planning-the-knot-wedding-channel-websites-forbes-woman-time-working-brides-survey.html>; [http://theweddingreport.com/index.cfm/action/wedding\\_statistics/view/market/id/00/idtype/s/location/united\\_states/](http://theweddingreport.com/index.cfm/action/wedding_statistics/view/market/id/00/idtype/s/location/united_states/)

<sup>5</sup> 2015 research study by Nashville-based LifeWay Research. The study, sponsored by Focus on the Family, surveyed 1,000 Protestant pastors, churchgoing Americans in healthy marriages, and 1,000 churchgoing Americans who divorced in the past five years.

<sup>6</sup> 2015 research study by Nashville-based LifeWay Research. The study, sponsored by Focus on the Family, surveyed 1,000 Protestant pastors, churchgoing Americans in healthy marriages, and 1,000 churchgoing Americans who divorced in the past five years.

<sup>7</sup> Gary L. Thomas, (2002). *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy*. Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI. p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; Harper Collins: 2001) 199.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph C. Aldrich, *Life-Style Evangelism* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah Press, 1981), 20,21.

<sup>10</sup> 2015 research study by Nashville-based LifeWay Research. The study, sponsored by Focus on the Family, surveyed 1,000 Protestant pastors, churchgoing Americans in healthy marriages, and 1,000 churchgoing Americans who divorced in the past five years.

<sup>11</sup> 2015 research study by Nashville-based LifeWay Research. The study, sponsored by Focus on the Family, surveyed 1,000 Protestant pastors, churchgoing Americans in healthy marriages, and 1,000 churchgoing Americans who divorced in the past five years.

<sup>12</sup> 2015 research study by Nashville-based LifeWay Research. The study, sponsored by Focus on the Family, surveyed 1,000 Protestant pastors, churchgoing Americans in healthy marriages, and 1,000 churchgoing Americans who divorced in the past five years.

<sup>13</sup> *Empowering Couples: Building on Your Strengths*, by David H. Olson and Amy K. Olson, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> 2015 research study by Nashville-based LifeWay Research. The study, sponsored by Focus on the Family, surveyed 1,000 Protestant pastors, churchgoing Americans in healthy marriages, and 1,000 churchgoing Americans who divorced in the past five years.

<sup>15</sup> 2015 research study by Nashville-based LifeWay Research. The study, sponsored by Focus on the Family, surveyed 1,000 Protestant pastors, churchgoing Americans in healthy marriages, and 1,000 churchgoing Americans who divorced in the past five years.

<sup>16</sup> 2015 research study by Nashville-based LifeWay Research. The study, sponsored by Focus on the Family, surveyed 1,000 Protestant pastors, churchgoing Americans in healthy marriages, and 1,000 churchgoing Americans who divorced in the past five years.

<sup>17</sup> *Does Divorce Make People Happy? Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages*. Institute for American Values, 2002

<sup>18</sup> *Does Divorce Make People Happy? Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages*. Institute for American Values, 2002

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.soundvision.com/article/wedding-statistics-in-the-united-states>