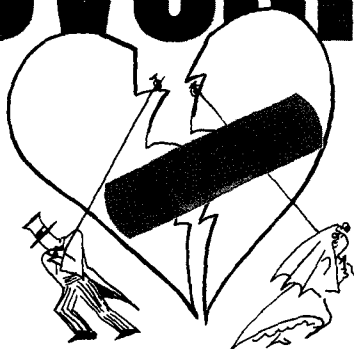


The Marriage- Saving Movement



A phenomenally successful movement of “marriage-saving” programs is springing up across the continent, and I know firsthand the difference they can make.

Twenty years ago, a project I was working on required me to commute weekly from Connecticut to Washington, D.C. I would board the train at 2 a.m. on Mondays and try to sleep my way down the tracks. After working all week in Washington, I’d arrive home late Friday night. My wife, Harriet, graciously put up with this for months, and even had candle-lit dinners waiting for me at 11 p.m. each Friday.

About this time, some couples at church encouraged us to “go on Marriage Encounter.” My first reaction was defensive: “I’ve got a good marriage, thanks.” “No,” they insisted, “this is a way to make a good marriage better.” To this reporter, that sounded like a public-relations line, but I kept hearing rave reviews from otherwise sensible people. So I asked Harriet if she wanted to go.

“NO!” she snapped.

“Why not? We’ve been apart for months. This will be good for us.”

“We can’t afford it,” she answered. Later, the friendly couples prompting me told us our way was already paid.

“By who?” I asked.

“By people who love you.”

That impressed me, since we had only been in this church a year or so.

With no more excuses, we set off for the site 70 miles away. Our first surprise was that the couples who had urged us to go had arrived early and fixed a wonderful dinner. That was followed by a series of talks by the lead couples. After each one, they had attendees write for ten minutes on a given question. We then met privately with

BY MICHAEL J. McMANUS

our spouse for 10 minutes to discuss what each had written. The first question was easy: "What is it that I admire about you and about our marriage, and how does it make me feel?" I wrote pages about how wonderful Harriet and our marriage were. When we exchanged notebooks back in our motel room, I noticed Harriet was much less enthusiastic.

Later, the assigned topic was, "What is it that I have not told you that I should have shared?" Harriet wrote this: "When you went to Washington, you abandoned me. You love your work more than me." I felt like I had been punched in the stomach, and asked her to tell me more. "Well, you are not a husband and are not a father! You are never home, except weekends. And even then you are always working. I asked you to take the kids for a 15-minute swim, and you said, 'I don't have time. I have to work.'"

I was so caught up in the difficulty of my work that I had not realized the effect it was having on Harriet. I wept and held her and said, "I don't love my work more than you. In fact, I've hated much of it, because I was failing. Please forgive me."

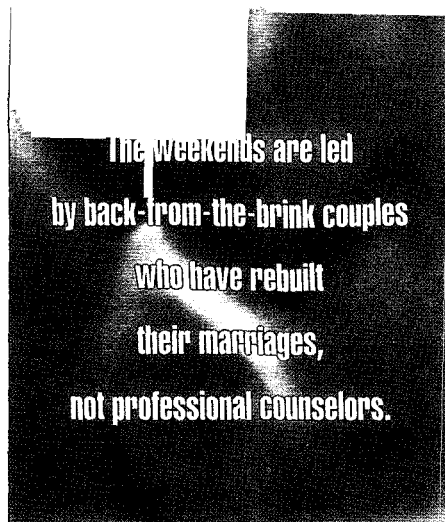
We fell back in love that weekend. It was like being on a second honeymoon—only better, because we had shared ten years together and rediscovered how much we loved one another. More importantly, my wife and I learned the absolute necessity of setting aside time on a daily basis to listen to one another, read Scripture and pray together. When our kids were young, we'd get up at 6:15 to do it; now it's a more rational hour. No longer does Harriet bottle up her feelings as she once did. And I have become a much better listener.

The central idea behind Marriage Encounter and the other marriage-saving programs is simple. Every church has a marriage-saving resource in its pews—couples who have built rewarding, lifelong marriages. They can help other couples do the same. But they have never been asked, equipped, or inspired to do so. With one exception: For 20 to 25 years, the celibate priests at many Catholic churches have turned marriage preparation over to older couples with solid marriages.

Marriage Encounter is a lay-led movement that originally came out of Catholicism and now involves a dozen denominations. About 2 million couples have attended one of its weekend retreats led by three couples with fulfilling marriages. Studies show that 80 to 90 percent of those attending literally fall back in love.

In Quebec, some Marriage Encounter leaders noticed that a few couples who attended the weekends still ended up getting divorced. Asked why, some of them said, "You were talking about powder-puff problems like poor communication. Our problems were much more serious—like ten years of adultery, an issue that no one mentioned at Marriage Encounter."

In response, Quebec Marriage Encounter couples created a more intensive weekend retreat called *Retrouvaille* (French for "rediscovery," pronounced *retro-vye*) to save marriages headed for divorce. They asked back-from-the-brink couples who had rebuilt marriages after adultery, alcoholism, or abuse to lead the



weekends. These veteran survivors speak openly about how they have overcome their problems, and serve as mentors to attending couples. The technique of writing 10 minutes and then talking in private about what each has written is the same as in Marriage Encounter.

Retrouvaille has swept across the border and is now in 100 metro areas in the United States. Its results are spectacular. In Northern Virginia, for example, a fifth of the 400 couples who attended were already

separated, yet 79 percent have since managed to rebuild their marriages. In Michigan, where a third of the participants had already filed divorce papers, four-fifths of the unions have been healed. All told, *Retrouvaille* has saved the marriages of 80 percent of the nearly 50,000 Canadian and American couples who have visited a session on the road to divorce.

There are also many local programs that have saved unions headed for divorce court. Jacksonville, Florida's Marriage Ministry is one such. It began when Rev. Dick McGinnis of St. David's Episcopal Church told his congregation one Sunday, "I would like to meet with any couples whose marriages were once on the rocks, but are now in a state of healing. Meet me in the chapel after the service."

He did not know if any couples would come forward, but ten couples did so, out of a congregation of 180 people. Thrilled, he told them, "I am overwhelmed trying to counsel all the tough marriages in this church. I went to the Lord in prayer, and what came to me was the way Alcoholics Anonymous works: Someone who has successfully overcome the addiction tells how he did it. We need similar couples who can tell how they turned around a bad marriage."

Of the ten couples, seven agreed to work with him. Their stories were diverse. One woman had been in an adulterous affair for eight years. One man was a bisexual who once had homosexual affairs on the side. Another man was an ex-drunk. The group developed 17 Marriage Ministry action steps—analogueous to A.A.'s 12 Steps—on how to save a bad marriage. These 17 "M&M" steps are potentially more far-reaching than A.A.'s 12 Steps, however, because while only a small fraction of Americans are alcoholics, more than half of all marriages are failing.

One of these founding couples illustrated how change could come. The wife explained that her husband was an alcoholic who was out of work for two years. "He would not discipline the children. He threw his clothes all around. All he did in this marriage was football and the garbage." But then she realized that part of the problem was her "sharp tongue." So she prayed to God to send angels down "to hold my tongue." He noticed right away that she was no longer griping. So he picked up his clothes one day. She was more amorous that night. He thought that was great. She could not change him, but she could change herself, and as she did so, she inspired change on his part.

Rev. McGinnis's seven original couples have now worked with 40 troubled marriages in their church, and helped to save 38 of them. That's a 95 percent success rate.

A dating relationship is designed to conceal information, not reveal it," writes James Dobson in *Love For a Lifetime*. "Each partner puts his or her best foot forward, hiding embarrassing facts, habits, flaws, and temperaments. Consequently...the stage is then set for arguments and hurt feelings (after the wedding) that never occurred during the courtship experience."

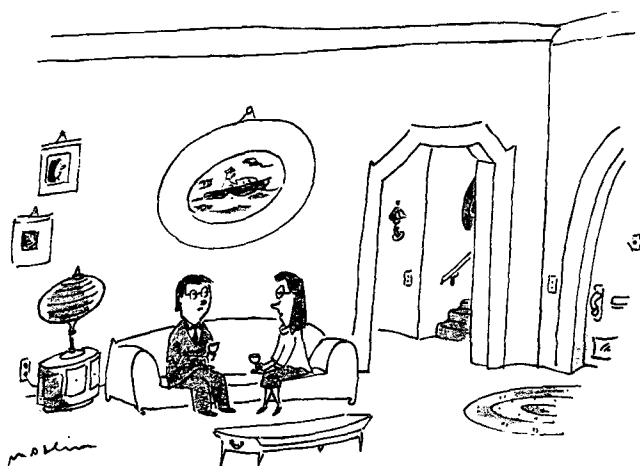
Given the intrinsic deceptiveness of romance, churches and synagogues (who conduct three-quarters of all first marriages) have an obligation to help couples accomplish two great goals: First, avoid a bad marriage before it begins. Second, learn to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable.

Couples approaching marriage desperately need an objective view of their strengths and weaknesses as a pair. There is no better way to do this than by asking engaged couples to take what is called a "premarital inventory." One of the best is called PREPARE, developed by Dr. David Olson, a family psychologist at the University of Minnesota. It presents 125 statements that both the man and woman are asked to agree or disagree with on separate questionnaires. Many of the items cleverly ask about one's partner—a subject about which people are more honest than they are about themselves:

- Sometimes I am concerned about my partner's temper.
- When we are having a problem, my partner often gives me the silent treatment.
- Sometimes I wish my partner were more careful in spending money.

The inventory is mailed to PREPARE/ENRICH, Inc. with a check for \$25, and the easy-to-read results are mailed back to one of 30,000 pastors or counselors who have attended a six-hour training session. More than 1 million couples have taken PREPARE, and half as many have taken its sister inventory, ENRICH, which measures satisfaction among the already-married.

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"Look, I'm not talking about a lifetime commitment.
I'm talking about marriage."

Remarkably, PREPARE predicts with 86 percent accuracy which couples will divorce, and with 80 percent accuracy who will have a good marriage. More importantly, 10 to 15 percent of those who take the test break off their engagements. Several studies show that these persons' scores are the same as those who marry but later divorce. Thus, those who break their engagements are avoiding a bad marriage before it begins. Others are helped to build a more successful marriage because they are helped to talk through issues while the relationship is young and they are still deeply in love and willing to change for their beloved.

Another major value of PREPARE is that it is simple enough for a mentoring couple to administer. PREPARE/ENRICH provides a kit that a pastor can use to train solidly married couples to undertake marriage preparation with the engaged. One part of the training involves having the potential mentor couple take ENRICH. This has a double value. It gives the mentors a sense of what it is like to take PREPARE, and it helps the pastor be sure a couple has a strong marriage before asking them to serve. Our church has trained 33 mentor couples to meet privately with each engaged couple four times before the wedding and once in the first year of marriage.

My wife, who runs our church's premarital program and now accompanies me in speaking around the country about our marriage-saving work, tells pastors: "A mentor couple can do a better job than a pastor. First, both sexes are involved. I usually understand the woman's concerns, and Mike, the young man's. We can be vulnerable and admit where we made mistakes, which is inappropriate for a pastor. And this is the most rewarding ministry we have ever been involved in. You can do it in the comfort of your own home, as a couple. It has strengthened our own relationship. We have rediscovered what Jesus meant when he said, 'Give, and you shall receive.'"

Three months ago, a black physician in her 30s called to say she and her male friend were considering marriage but were concerned about communication problems they were having. They agreed to come to our marriage prep classes.

My heart sank when I looked at their inventory. They scored 0 on communication and 20 percent on conflict resolution. *Both* said their partner was giving them the silent treatment. Andrew said Gloria made comments that put him down. She wished he were more willing to share his feelings with her. Andrew, an engineer, said, "Gloria doesn't understand how I feel."

"Andrew," I asked, "if you don't share your feelings with Gloria, how can you expect her to understand you? If she calls you at the end of the day, and asks, 'How was your day?' what do you say in response?"

"Great or terrible," he replied.

"Bad answer. What she wants is detail. Even though you are an engineer, you can push yourself to say, 'I had a great day because I finished my project much earlier than expected, and my boss complimented me.' Or, 'It was terrible. I lost two days of work on my computer by pushing the wrong button.' What she wants is detail." Both Harriet and Gloria nodded in agreement.

Three weeks later, they came to our home for another session with big smiles on their faces. I asked, "How is it going? Gloria, is he sharing his feelings with you?"

"He really is," she replied.
"Andrew, do you now feel understood?"

"Yes, and she's not nagging any more."

"How about the silent treatment?" Harriet asked.

"We don't do that any more."

As this story illustrates, the inventory is only *predictive*—not *determinative*. A couple who want to solve their problems can do so. Harriet and I simply used the test to conduct a kind of X-ray of their relationship, and then applied common sense to suggest where Gloria and Andrew could improve their communication. They both had more degrees than Harriet or I, but they lacked our 30 years of experience as a married couple. And their inner-city African-American church had not trained any mentor couples. So they were willing to cross over the cultural barrier and drive 12 miles to our home.


At present, about 250,000 to 300,000 of the 2.4 million couples who marry every year take a premarital inventory, but not one percent of churches have trained mentor couples to do this work. Yet it is easy to do so, requiring only the same six-hour seminar attended by clergy. The inventory is a bridge upon which an older generation can meet a younger one and pass on its wisdom.

Since any church can be a marriage saver, in my own meetings with local clergy groups I challenge them to jump-start all of these reforms in many churches at the same time in what I call a "Community Marriage Policy."

The first city to take up my challenge was Modesto, California, back in 1986. Since then, the clergy of another 42 cities have made similar covenants, across denominational lines, to take more seriously their responsibility as the main administrators of marriage in their communities. The cities who have signed on range from Fairbanks, Alaska, to Montgomery, Alabama. This January, 252 pastors in Austin, Texas, representing 210 churches in over 30 denominations, signed what they called a "Community Marriage Statement" that represents the largest such policy yet.

In a typical case in Peoria, Illinois, clergy from 19 denominations resolved:

Fatherhood and Marriage

 marriage is a universal social institution, present in every known society. The vast majority of humans marry sometime during their lives, and almost all marriages the world over take place between just one man and one woman at a time (although in some societies men may subsequently marry additional women while still married to their original wives—simultaneous polygamy).


Among the premodern societies of the world today, marriage is one of the most important and certainly the most ubiquitous of social institutions. It has been defined simply as "a relationship within which a group socially approves and encourages sexual intercourse and the birth of children." Group approval, rather than merely individual preference, has always been a major component of the institution. Throughout most of recorded history the majority of marriages have probably been arranged (with the principals having some say in the matter). They were less alliances of two individuals than of two kin networks.

A major purpose of marriage is to keep men attached to their mates so that offspring will have the best chance of survival. Through marriage, societies normally hold the biological parents responsible for each other and for their progeny. In addition, because marriage includes sexual obligations and rights, one of the most central being the male's right of exclusive sexual access to his wife, the institution helps to prevent men from openly pursuing other men's wives. This, in turn, increases paternity confidence, which is critical to the involvement of fathers in childrearing.

Marriage is thus the institution through which societies have sought to engage the basic problem of fatherhood—while biology pulls men in the direction of promiscuity, culture seeks to pull them toward loyalty. Margaret Mead once suggested that there is no society where men will stay married for very long unless culturally required to do so. The marriage ceremony, infused with ritual and public acknowledgment, symbolizes the cultural pull. It stresses a strong social bond which includes the long-run commitment of the male, the durability of the marital relationship, and the importance of the union for children.

Adapted from Life Without Father by David Popenoe, just published by The Free Press.

Is the Decline of Marriage Inevitable?

 nternational data suggest that marriage and modern life are not nearly so incompatible as divorce advocates would have us believe. Germany, for example, has an out-of-wedlock birth rate that is just half that of America's. In Italy the rate is less than a quarter of ours. In today's Japan, just 1 percent of babies are born outside of marriage, the same proportion as in 1970, and the divorce rate is so low that almost all minor children live with both their married parents.

While America may never return to the low divorce and illegitimacy rates of the past century, there is every reason to believe we can, if we choose, meet two simple goals: 1) Stabilize marriage, so that the majority of lovers who wed succeed in making a permanent union of spirit and flesh. 2) Reconnect marriage with childbearing, so that each year more and more American babies live under the protection of a couple publicly joined by vows of devotion.

Absent such an effort there is no sign that the decline of marriage is anywhere near over. Recent data strongly suggest that the real (as opposed to crude) divorce rate has yet to level off. Among persons marrying in the late 1970s, the proportion divorced within five years was 22 percent. For those marrying in the early '80s, the proportion divorced within five years nudged up to 23 percent. Meanwhile, the illegitimacy rate has jumped 66 percent since 1980, and is still climbing.

Adapted from The Abolition of Marriage by Maggie Gallagher, just published by Regnery.