

## THE CHURCH: A "WEDDING FACTORY" OR "MARRIAGE SAVER?"

by Michael J. McManus

### Many of America's Churches are Wedding Factories

It is time to acknowledge that organized religion is partly responsible for the soaring divorce rate. Three-fourths of all first marriages are blessed by priests, pastors or rabbis, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. Gallup Polls indicate two-thirds of all adults are members of a church or synagogue and 43% attended religious services in an average week of 1995.<sup>1</sup>

Yet nearly half of those marrying in the late 60s and early 70s are already divorced.<sup>2</sup> And some demographers, such as Larry Bumpass at the University of Wisconsin, estimate that 60% of new marriages will end in permanent separation or divorce.<sup>3</sup> Others, such as the 1991 National Commission on Children, estimate that only half of U.S. marriages are ending in divorce. But even at that lower figure, America's divorce rates are the world's highest.<sup>4</sup>

Since U.S. churches have access to the vast majority of American marriages, the conclusion is inescapable that most churches are only "blessing machines" or "wedding factories" when it comes to marriage. They grind out weddings on Saturdays with no clear strategy to help couples prepare for a life-long marriage, to strengthen marriage at the midterm, or to save them when they are headed for divorce.

### Some Churches Are "Marriage Savers"

---

<sup>1</sup>"Emerging Trends," Princeton Religion Research Center, February, 1996.

<sup>2</sup>Dennis A. Ahlburg and Carol J. DeVita, "New Realities of the American Family," *Population Bulletin* 47, No. 2 (August, 1992): 15.

<sup>3</sup>Teresa Castro Martin and Larry L. Bumpass, "Recent Trends in Marital Disruption," *Demography* 26, (1989): 37-51.

<sup>4</sup>*Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families; Final Report of the National Commission on Children.* 1991, Chaired by Sen. John D. Rockefeller IV. On pages 18-19 the Report concludes, "This nation has the highest divorce rate in the world. At present rates, approximately half of all U.S. marriages can be expected to end in divorce."

On the other hand, a successful movement of "marriage saving" programs is springing up across the continent, created largely by churches. Thousands of churches are what I call "marriage savers," places which have pioneered important reforms to save marriages. This article, and a book I have written, *Marriage Savers: Helping Your Friends and Family Avoid Divorce*,<sup>5</sup> present evidence that some churches are helping couples achieve six great goals:

- **Avoid a bad marriage before it begins:** Some 50,000 churches administer a premarital inventory that can predict which marriages will end in divorce. In fact, a tenth of couples using one inventory break their engagements when they see the results. Their scores are equal to those who marry and later divorce.
- **Give the engaged "marriage insurance."** During the four years my wife and I have led marriage preparation at our church, we have had many broken engagements, but no divorces or separations that we know of, out of 130 couples.
- **Strengthen existing marriage.** Sixty academic studies of a weekend retreat called Marriage Encounter, provide evidence that 80%-90% of attendees fall back in love with a spouse, and learn skills permanently improving their marriage.
- **Save 80% to 90% of deeply troubled marriages.** One national program called "Retrouvaille" has saved 80% of nearly 50,000 marriages headed for divorce, and two church-based interventions work in 92%-95% of the cases.
- **Help more than half of separated couples to reconcile.** Between 20% and 40% of Retrouvaille attendees are already living apart, yet four-fifths are saved.
- **Push down the divorce rate for a metro area.** When clergy from 19 denominations in Peoria signed a "Community Marriage Policy" that jump-starts these reforms, divorces plunged 20% in the first year.

America's Central Domestic  
Problem: The Breakup of the Family

---

<sup>5</sup>Michael J. McManus, *Marriage Savers: Helping Your Friends And Family Avoid Divorce*, Zondervan Publishing House (1993, 1995), Grand Rapids, Mich. 346 pages, with Appendix listing addresses of 25 Marriage Saver groups, and an Index.

Before examining how some churches are saving marriages in detail, it is important to understand what is happening to destroy America's families. The central domestic problem of our time is the breakup of the family. As the Council on Families in America reported last year:

America's divorce revolution has failed. The evidence of failure is overwhelming. The divorce revolution... has created terrible hardships for children. It has generated poverty within families. It has burdened us with unsupportable social costs. It has failed to deliver on its promise of greater adult happiness and better relationships between men and women.

Here is some of the evidence:

-- **More than half of America's marriages are ending** in divorce or permanent separation.<sup>7</sup> Divorces tripled between 1960 and 1980, rising from 393,000 in 1960 to nearly 1.2 million.<sup>8</sup> America's divorce rate is highest in the world: double that of Europe, and three times that of Japan. A million children see their parents walk away from each other each year. Further some studies show that 80% of divorces are unilateral -- forced by one person on a spouse who wants to reconcile.<sup>9</sup> And the number of currently divorced (and not remarried) people quadrupled from 4.3 million in 1970 to

---

<sup>6</sup>"Marriage in America: A Report To the Nation," by the Council on Families in America, March, 1995, organized by the Institute for American Values, 1841 Broadway, Suite 211, New York, N.Y. 10023. This is the best succinct summary of the dilemma of marriage and divorce in America.

<sup>7</sup>Of the 108,500,000 individuals who are married in America, 6,730,000 are separated from their spouse, according to the Census Bureau's report, "Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1994," published in February, 1996, and written by Arlene F. Saluter. If these separated individuals are added to those who divorce, the "marriage dissolution" rate is "closer to 60%" said Dr. Larry Bumpass of the University of Wisconsin in his 1990 Presidential Address to the Population Association of America, published in *Demography*, #27 November 1990.

<sup>8</sup>The figure in 1980 was 1,189,000, and it has remained at almost precisely that same number every year since, according "Monthly Vital Statistics Report" of the National Center for Health Statistics, March 22, 1995. The 1994 figure was 1,191,000. Since population grew in that period, the divorce rate has fallen 11.6% from 5.2 divorces per 1,000 people in 1980 to 4.6 per 1,000 in 1994. But that's still more than double the 2.2/1,000 rate of 1960.

<sup>9</sup>Maggie Gallagher, *The Abolition of Marriage: How We Destroy Lasting Love*, Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 1996.

17.4 million in 1994.<sup>10</sup>

-- **Cohabitation has soared seven-fold since 1970.** According to the Census Bureau, only 500,000 couples were cohabiting in March, 1970, vs. 3.7 million in March, 1994.<sup>11</sup> Almost half of all persons marrying in the early 1980s, cohabited first.<sup>12</sup> By some estimates, more than half now do so.

-- **Cohabitation is a double cancer of marriage.** "Marriages that are preceded by living together have 50 percent higher disruption rates than marriages without premarital cohabitation."<sup>13</sup> Thus cohabitation is a cancer at the center of marriage. And it is a cancer at the front end too. Living together has become a substitute for getting married at all. Forty percent of those whose unions begin with cohabitation, break up short of marriage. Result: the number of never-married Americans more than doubled from 21 million in 1970 to 44 million in 1994<sup>14</sup> largely due to cohabitation.

-- **The marriage rate has fallen 41% since 1960.**<sup>15</sup> It is shocking that only 55% of U.S. adults are married and living together today -- the lowest figure in history. Children of divorce are especially fearful of making a marriage commitment, and are most susceptible to cohabitation.

-- **One-third of children are now born out of wedlock --** 1.2 million kids a year. By 1994, 40% of never-married women in their thirties have had a child, reports Maggie Gallagher in her important new book, *The Abolition of Marriage*.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Saluter, "Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1994," page vi.

<sup>11</sup>Saluter, "Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1994."

<sup>12</sup>Larry L. Bumpass, "The Declining Significance of Marriage: Changing Family Life in the United States," Working paper No. 66, *A National Survey of Families and Households*, Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin, a paper presented at the Potsdam International Conference, "Changing Families and Childhood," Dec. 14-17, 1994.

<sup>13</sup>This estimate is also from the *National Survey of Families and Households*, conducted by Larry Bumpass and James Sweet at the University of Wisconsin. Estimates are based on 100 minute interviews with 13,017 respondents in 1987 and 1988. See "The Role of Cohabitation in Declining Rates of marriage," Working Paper #5.

<sup>14</sup>Saluter, "Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1994."

<sup>15</sup>The marriage rate has fallen 41% since 1960, from 148 marriages per 1,000 women to 87/1,000 in 1990, according to S.C. Clarke, *Advance Report of Final Marriage Statistics 1989-90* (July, 1995), Monthly Vital Statistics, National Center for Health Statistics.

<sup>16</sup>Maggie Gallagher, *The Abolition of Marriage: How We Destroy*

**-- Broken families are cataclysmic for children.** "Tonight, about 40% of American children will go to sleep in homes in which their fathers do not live," writes David Blankenhorn in *Fatherless America*: "Before they reach the age of 18, more than half of our nation's children are likely to spend at least a significant portion of their childhoods living apart from their fathers. Never before in this country have so many children been voluntarily abandoned by their fathers."

#### Children Suffer the Most

A child of divorce can read the situation only one way: "Dad divorced Mom. He doesn't love me." A child of cohabitation can only come to a worse conclusion: "Dad doesn't love me, and he never loved Mom either. He never married her." This sense of abandonment shatters a child's self-esteem, unlike the death of a father, whose absence was not the father's choice. Not surprisingly, these children growing up in single parent homes are twice as likely as those in intact homes to drop out of school, become teen parents, be delinquent and earn less as adults. They are also less likely to marry, more likely to divorce, and more likely to have out-of-wedlock children themselves.<sup>17</sup>

The Council on Families in America notes that these trends should be surprising since "We are much richer than ever before...Between 1964 and 1979 the income supporting the average pre-school child in America increased (in inflation-adjusted dollars) by 42%." And the proportion of adults to children, at least theoretically "has jumped from fewer than two adults for every child in 1960 to a current ratio of 3 to 1."<sup>18</sup>

Yet the Council says "The current generation of children and youth is the first in our nation's history to be less well-off -- psychologically, socially, economically and morally -- than their parents were at the same age." Why? The decline of marriage. "With each passing year, an ever smaller percentage of the nation's citizens are married and an ever larger percentage of the nation's children live in households that do not consist of two married parents."<sup>19</sup>

Boys in single family homes are more violent. But their violence differs in its target, depending on the cause of the father's absence. Children of divorce are more likely to express their anger toward themselves. As divorces tripled, so did teen suicide. Illegitimate children are more likely to aim their violence at

---

*Lasting Love* (Washington D.C. Regnery Publishing Inc.), 5.

<sup>17</sup>Gallagher, *The Abolition of Marriage*, 27-36.

<sup>18</sup>"Marriage in America: A Report to the Nation," March 1995, 5.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, p. 4.

others -- in assaults, robbery, murder. Of course, most children will survive divorce -- and even illegitimacy -- without becoming juvenile delinquents, criminals, or dropouts. Most become contributing citizens. But a growing wedge of parental irresponsibility is destroying a wide swath of U.S. families.

The Census Bureau reports that single mothers are five times more likely to be poor than those with married parents present. In 1990, for example, the median family income for unwed mothers was \$8,337 -- half that of divorced mothers, and less than a quarter the \$40,000 income of an intact couple. Finally, children who see their parents walk away from each other -- and those born out-of-wedlock -- often suffer from subsequent chaos in their personal lives. For example, most divorced people remarry, but the divorce rate for second marriages is 60%. Half of the children of one divorce will live through another by the time they are 18! Barbara Dafoe Whitehead summarized this chaos eloquently in a widely-quoted article for the April, 1993 issue of *The Atlantic*: "Dan Quayle Was Right:"

Family disruption is best understood not as a single event but as a string of disruptive events: separation, divorce, life in a single-parent family, life with a parent and a live-in lover, the re-marriage of one or both parents, life in one stepparent family combined with visits to another stepparent family; the breakup of one or both stepparent families.

#### Most Adults Suffer From Divorce

Judith Wallerstein wrote a book called *Second Chances* that should be read by anyone considering a divorce. She interviewed 60 families at the time of divorce -- and reinterviewed both adults and children after five years, 10 years and even 15 years. This is the only longitudinal study of divorce I know about. Though her families were affluent suburbanites, the majority of adults did not find a happy "second chance" at life:

-- In only 10% of divorced couples do both husband and wife "reconstruct happier, fuller lives."

-- In 25% of the former couples, "neither the man or woman is better off."

-- In the remaining two-thirds of couples, one partner feels "unhappy much of the time, often suffers from loneliness, anxiety or depression and may be preoccupied with financial concerns." The other partner is happy after divorce. Most remarry. But second marriages, especially those with children from

previous marriages, dissolve at a 60%+ rate.<sup>20</sup> So how long are even they happy?<sup>21</sup>

Further, a man or woman who divorces is twice as likely to die of cancer in any given year compared to a married person, according to J.J. Lynch, author of *The Broken Heart: Medical Consequences of Loneliness*. He reports that men are also twice as likely to die of heart disease or stroke, four times more likely to die via auto accidents and suicide and seven times higher by cirrhosis of the liver and pneumonia.<sup>22</sup>

It is better to save the marriages we are in than to ditch a spouse and try to find a greener field. In fact, for most people, there are no greener fields.

### The Central Reform: Mentoring Couples

The good news is that thousands of churches really are "marriage savers." What they are doing right is not well known. That's why I wrote *Marriage Savers* which puts a spotlight on ten major reforms that have been pioneered by scattered churches. One can be seen in more than 50,000 churches -- the use of a premarital inventory.<sup>23</sup>

Another, Marriage Encounter, has helped renew nearly 2 million marriages. Other solutions have emerged from a single church, and have been transplanted, thus far, in only a few other congregations.

The central idea behind most of these reforms is very simple. **Every church has a marriage saving resource in its pews -- couples who have built rewarding, life-long marriages. They can come along side other couples, and help them to be successful. However, in 95% of churches, they have never been asked, inspired or equipped to do so.**

---

<sup>20</sup>Arthur J. Norton and Paul Glick report a 60% failure rate of second marriages in "One-Parent Families: A Social and Economic Profile," published in *Family Relations* January, 1986. Those with stepchildren break up at a higher rate.

<sup>21</sup>Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *Second Chances: Men, Women and Children a Decade After Divorce* (New York, Ticknor & fields, 1989, 40. Her findings are summarized in *Marriage Savers*, 32, 36-7.

<sup>22</sup>J.J. Lynch, *The Medical Consequences of Loneliness*, "The Lonely Heart, Broken Heart, and Sudden Death," Basic Books, New York, 1977.

<sup>23</sup>This figure is my estimate based on the fact that more than 30,000 pastors and counselors have been trained to do PREPARE, mostly in Protestant churches. FOCCUS, an inventory developed by the Diocese of Omaha, is used in most of the nation's nearly 20,000 Catholic churches, and there are other inventories in thousands of churches, such as PMI.

There is one major exception to this generalization. For 20-25 years, Catholic churches have turned marriage preparation over to older couples with solid marriages. Since priests are celibate, they asked married couples to do marriage prep.

Another couple-led movement which came out of Catholicism is called Marriage Encounter, though it is now in a dozen Protestant denominations. Finally, Catholic couples, whose marriages nearly ended in divorce, tell how they recovered in a weekend retreat for currently troubled marriages. They called the weekend "Retrouvaille," which is French for "Rediscovery."

These couple-pioneered reforms -- and even better ones that have grown out of a few Protestant churches -- are explored below in more detail. What's common to each innovation are volunteer "mentoring couples" who give time to reach out to help others to make it. This movement is analogous to other successful self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, but is led by couples, not individuals.

#### The Pre-Marital Inventory

"A dating relationship is designed to conceal information, not reveal it, wrote Dr. 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."<sup>24</sup>

Romance is deceptive. Therefore, churches and synagogues --who marry 74% of all those in first marriages<sup>25</sup> -- have an obligation to help couples accomplish two important goals: First, churches should help those they marry to avoid a bad marriage before it begins. Second, churches should equip couples with conflict resolution skills which can gird them with "marriage insurance."

How? To begin with, couples contemplating marriage urgently need an objective view of their relationship's strengths and weaknesses. 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 (Premarital Personal and Relationship Evaluation) developed by Dr. David Olson, a family psychologist at the University of Minnesota. He recommends that PREPARE be taken at an earlier stage, by seriously dating couples as part of their decision-making process about **whether** to become engaged. It is an infinitely more constructive way to consider a possible partner for

---

<sup>24</sup>James C. Dobson, Ph.D. *Love for a Lifetime* (Portland, OR, Questar

<sup>25</sup>National Center for Health Statistics: *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1987, Vol. 3, iii, Marriage and Divorce*. DHHS, Pub. No. (PHS) 91-1103. Public Health Service, Washington, 1991.

life than a "trial marriage," where the odds are only one in six that one will still be with that partner after a decade.<sup>26</sup>

PREPARE consists of 125 statements that both the man and the woman agree or disagree with, with a filled out questionnaire, taken separately. For example, many of the items ask about one's partner -- a subject people are more likely to be honest about:

- 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 sent to PREPARE/ENRICH, Inc.<sup>27</sup> with a check for \$25, and the results are mailed back in an easy-to-read computer-scored report to one of 30,000 trained pastors or counselors now using it. All of them have attended a six-hour session to learn how to use the instrument. The inventory can not be bought off the shelf. One has to be trained first in a six-hour session by a certified trainer. More than 1 million couples have taken PREPARE, and half as many have taken its sister inventory, ENRICH, which measures satisfaction among married couples.

Remarkably, PREPARE predicts with an 81% accuracy which couples will divorce, and with 79% accuracy who will have a good marriage.<sup>28</sup> More important, 10%-15% of those who take it, break their engagements. Several studies show that their 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 are more willing to change because they are deeply in love.

Taking a premarital inventory is a vastly better way to decide whether to marry someone -- than living with one's partner. In fact, a study of 17,024 couples taking PREPARE found that cohabiting couples had "significantly lower premarital satisfaction compared to couples

---

<sup>26</sup>As noted above, 40 out of 100 couples who begin a "trial marriage" break up short of the wedding, according to the University of Wisconsin. Of the 60 who marry, the divorce rate is 50% above that of those who don't live together. So instead of half of the marriages failing (30 of the 60), 75% will fail -- 45 out of the 60 by the ten year mark. That leaves 15 still together. What terrible odds. By contrast, 10% of those who take PREPARE break up short of the wedding, and another 5% postpone the wedding date.

<sup>27</sup>PREPARE/ENRICH, Inc. Box 190, Minneapolis, MN 55440-0190.

<sup>28</sup>Blaine J. Fowers, David H. Olson, "Predicting Marital Success with PREPARE, A Predictive Validity Study," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, October, 1986, Vol. 12. No. 4.

where the two people still lived alone....Almost two-thirds (64%) of the cohabiting couples fell into the low satisfaction group, whereas almost two-thirds (64%) of the couples where both partners lived alone, fell into the very satisfied group.<sup>29</sup> See Chart below.

Another premarital inventory widely used by Catholics is called FOCCUS (Facilitating Open Couple Communication Understanding and Study). It was written by the Family Life Office of the Diocese of Omaha, 3214 North 60th St., Omaha, NE 68104. It is used as widely as PREPARE, but is less predictive of which marriages will fail (70% vs. 86% for PREPARE), and only 3.6% break their engagements after taking FOCCUS compared to a tenth of those taking PREPARE.<sup>30</sup>

#### Involving Mentoring Couples in Marriage Prep

Another major value of PREPARE is that it can be a bridge between a young couple and one whose marriage has worked for decades. The inventory is simple enough for a mentoring couple to administer. PREPARE/ENRICH provides "Lay Leadership Training Materials" for \$30 per couple that a pastor can use to equip solidly married couples to undertake marriage preparation with the engaged for marriage. In fact, my wife, Harriet, and I have trained 33 couples in our church (Fourth Presbyterian in Bethesda, MD) to give the inventory and go over its results with young couples. 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 to be sure a couple has a strong marriage before asking them to serve. Three couples we trained had such poor scores, we told them we did not think this was an appropriate ministry for them "at this time." (We then told them how Marriage Encounter strengthened our marriage and urged them to go.)

My wife, Harriet, who runs our premarital program, and now accompanies me in speaking around the country about our marriage-saving ministry, tells pastors: "This is the most rewarding ministry we have ever been involved in. I have taught Sunday School, and Mike has also taught. But that divided us as a couple at church. This is a ministry you can do in the comfort of your own home, as

---

<sup>29</sup> PREPARE/ENRICH Newsletter, Fall, 1988, Vol. 2, No. 2.

<sup>30</sup> "Marriage Preparation in the Catholic Church: Getting It Right," November, 1995, a report by Creighton University.

a couple. It has strengthened our own relationship. We have rediscovered what Jesus meant when he said, 'Give, and you shall receive.'

She adds, "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. Also, we have the time to go over 125 issues with each couple." In four years, we've given PREPARE to 130 couples. A number broke engagements, but there are no divorces."

Recently, a physician in her 30s called to say she and her male friend were considering marriage, but were concerned about communication problems they were having. "Can you help us?" I replied, "Yes. Guaranteed. We can help any couple improve its communication. Come to our marriage prep classes which we are running right now, and my wife and I will mentor you."

My heart sank when I looked at their inventory. They scored 0 on Communication and 20% on Conflict Resolution. Both accused their partner of giving them the silent treatment. Andrew said Gloria made comments which put him down. She wished he were more willing to share his feelings with her. And the young man, an engineer, said, Gloria "does not 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. You told us that what we were doing was childish, and you were right."

I was so astonished, I took out the inventory, and went over the ten items in Communication and ten more in Conflict Resolution. They scored 100%! I asked, "What happened to turn things around?"

"You were right that I was not sharing my feelings with Gloria. When I did so, it solved other problems."<sup>31</sup>

Rarely does a couple's learning come so swiftly and completely. However, the case illustrates the value of using the inventory as an X-ray of a couple's relationship, and of having a mature man and woman sit down with a younger man and woman, and talk through the results. Their scores appeared to predict a future divorce. But the inventory is only **predictive** -- not **determinative**. A couple who wants to solve its problems can do so. We simply used common sense, to suggest how they could improve their communication. Both Gloria and Andrew 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 racial and cultural barrier, and drive 12 miles to our home. The case also illustrates that a mentoring couple can ask probing questions to give a young couple the perspective they need to grow toward one another.

At the opposite extreme of time required in mentoring, Harriet and I met with a couple three years ago, both of whom were 45 years old, and had never married. We met with them eight times over a six month period. Part way through, Tom, who loves to take a sailboat out on the Chesapeake Bay, told us: "I finally realized that I had been dating one girl after another without getting anywhere. We'd sail out, and it would be beautiful. Then a squall would kick up. We'd have an argument, and I'd think, 'This must not be the person God intended for me.' I'd take her back to the dock, and deposit her. I've been putting women back on the dock for 20 years. I need to make a commitment to one woman." But he simply could not make that commitment -- not even to Annie, whom he said he loved.

They broke up, then began dating again. He loved her, but saw things in her that he felt threatened by -- her competence professionally, for example. The longer people wait to marry, the more barnacles they seem to pick up -- individual idiosyncracies that rub one another the wrong way. From time to time, Harriet would talk with Annie and urge her not give up, though she felt like it. Every six months or so I'd call Tom and ask, "How are things going?"

---

<sup>31</sup>The couple is now engaged, and as I write this, mail arrived this morning with a wedding invitation!

We rode a roller coaster with them, up and down, and around the curves. Once after a bitter argument, he was ready to quit. We urged them to come over and talk out the issue in front of us. They finally became engaged, and at a party thrown by a friend, Tom told the gathered group: "We would never be getting married, if it were not for the help Mike and Harriet gave us." I replied, "We have never sat on a nest where the eggs took so long to hatch!" Two weeks ago, when both were aged 48, they got married and had a reception at a restaurant in Annapolis. Both of their parents were present, and thought their "child" would never marry. Afterwards, they got into a black gondola, which sailed in a circle, and seemed to be coming back to the dock. I shouted, "Don't bring her back to the dock!" Only Tom and Annie knew the private joke.

At present, about 250,000 to 300,000 of the 2.4 million couples who marry every year take a premarital inventory.<sup>32</sup> However, not one percent of churches have trained mentor couples to do this exciting work. Frankly, the training is easy to do -- the same six-hour seminar attended by clergy. And the ENRICH inventory given as part of the training can help any couple to identify issues in their own marriage that need attention.

St. Paul, in writing to the Ephesians said the job of the pastor is to "equip the saints for ministry," or "train God's people for service." My question for pastors and church lay leaders is what more important ministry or service is there than saving marriages?

#### Marriage Encounter: The Best Marriage Saver

I know first-hand the difference a church-based intervention 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 train tracks and shave in Union Station. I'd work all week in Washington, and arrive home late Friday night. Harriet put up with this graciously for months, and even had a candle-lit dinner waiting for me at 11 p.m. on Fridays.

At that time some couples at church encouraged us "to go on Marriage Encounter." I asked, "What is it?"

---

<sup>32</sup>This is my estimate, based on several facts. PREPARE is given to more than 100,000 couples a year. Exact numbers of those who take FOCCUS are unknown, because they are not processed centrally like PREPARE. But at least a significant minority of the 350,000 Catholics who get married each year take the inventory. In the Archdiocese of Washington, for example, 60 of 140 parishes use the inventory. Therefore, I have estimated that 150,000 Catholic couples are probably using FOCCUS. There are other inventories, such as PMI, reaching at least 50,000. So the 250,000 estimate is conservative.

They replied, "It's a way to strengthen your marriage." My first reaction was resentment: "I've got a good marriage, thanks."

"No. This is a way to make a good marriage better," they asserted. It sounded like a PR line to this reporter. 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 have been apart for months. This will be good for us."

"We can't afford it," she said. I sensed that her real reason not to go went to a deeper issue, but did not know what it was. Later, couples told us our way is 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. Harriet had no more excuses so we went to a motel 70 miles away. Our first surprise was that the four couples who had urged us to go, had all gotten there ahead of us and prepared a festive welcoming party with balloons for us. We had never experienced such unmerited love.

The weekend itself consists of a series of talks by the lead couples. After each one, they give attendees an assignment to write for 10 minutes on a given question. We then met for 10 minutes with our spouse in private to discuss what each had written. The first assignment 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 to me. We exchanged notebooks back in our motel room, and I noticed Harriet was much less enthusiastic.

Later, the writing assignment was, "What is it that I have not told you that I should have shared?" Harriet wrote, "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 personal difficulties that I had not realized the impact I was having on Harriet. I wept and held her and said, "I do not love my work more than you. In fact, I've hated much of it, because I was failing. Please forgive me."

We did fall back in love that weekend. For me, 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.

I asked Harriet recently for her assessment of the importance of that weekend 20 years ago. She replied, "Marriage Encounter was a unique weekend, an opportunity to focus on each other on two different levels. One was to learn life-time tools to equip ourselves for intimate communication, the kind of communication every husband and wife needs to nourish or sustain a marriage. Secondly, we have attended two different Marriage Encounters, one ten years after we were married, and another 29 years afterwards. In the process of sharing feelings deeply, one overriding issue that had laid dormant in our relationship, yet needed to be dealt with floated to the top and was addressed."

Nor was our experience unique. About two million couples have attended a Marriage Encounter weekend. And 61 academic studies, which interviewed couples before attending Marriage Encounter, and afterwards, reveal a "vastly preponderant positive impact," according to a Doctor of Ministry thesis by Dr. George McIlrath.<sup>33</sup> He writes, "Marriage Encounter programs have often received affirmations of 80% to 90% in post-weekend surveys, and the program demonstrates clear effectiveness when its participants are involved in rigorous and controlled pre- and post-weekend research." To put it more simply, 80% to 90% fall back in love!

McIlrath cites a 1976 study on Long Island by Robert Henry Neuhaus in which 19 couples attending a Marriage Encounter are compared with 20 other couples who did not go. Using a G.T. Barrett-Leonard Relationship Inventory, each couple's relationship was measured before Marriage Encounter, and both one week and four weeks later. The ME couples "showed significant improvement in relationships while the control group stayed static."<sup>34</sup> Rev. Paul DeBeer offered the first long-term assessment in a D. Min dissertation for San Francisco Theological Seminary in 1980. He asked 100 couples for their self-assessment of the effects of the weekend with both an extended questionnaire and personal interviews. "Two-thirds of the couples had been encountered more than 2 years previously," summarizes McIlrath. "By self-report 94% of the 100 individual respondents stated that their weekend had a positive and beneficial impact on their lives with a variety of 5 point Lykert scale responses..."<sup>35</sup>

A more important study cited by both McIlrath and Chapter 9 of *Marriage Savers* was conducted by the National Institute on the Family to commemorate Marriage Encounter's 25th anniversary in the

---

<sup>33</sup> See chapter 3 of his thesis, "Assessing Marriage Encounter," written for a D. Min. thesis for the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. The chapter cites 61 studies on the impact of marriage Encounter, two of which are brief briefly quoted here.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pages 56-7.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 64.

U.S.<sup>36</sup> Questionnaires were sent to 4,000 couples who had attended over a 25 year period, 325 of whom responded. Only 55% said their marriages were good or excellent before attending, and 45% said their marriages were "average" or "poor." In terms of improving their communication, 83% said the immediate impact of the weekend was high. Years later, 200 of the 325 respondents said the long-term impact on "intimacy and closeness" was high or very good, and the same number rated their current couple communication as "excellent" -- nearly two-thirds of respondents.<sup>37</sup>

Why does Marriage Encounter have such a long-term impact? Couples learn the absolute necessity of taking time on a **daily** basis to listen to one another, to talk and pray together. Some ME couples continue the discipline of writing for ten minutes and talking for 10 minutes on a daily basis. Asked why, one man told me: "I'm a salesman and very verbal. My wife told me that I was always interrupting her. When she writes, she can say what she wants, and I owe it to her to pay attention." For 20 years Harriet and I have gotten up a little earlier than necessary -- not to do "10 & 10s" -- but to have coffee in bed as we talk informally, read some Scripture and some commentary from books such as *Quiet Times for Couples* by H. Norman Wright. Result: no longer does Harriet bottle up her feelings as she once did. And I have become a better listener. We conclude with a prayer for each other, seeking to make the Lord a third partner of our marriage. It is a great way to start the day. I would never have looked for other examples of how to strengthen marriage -- or written *Marriage Savers* had not Marriage Encounter's impact been so profound upon our marriage.

Further, while Marriage Encounter began among Catholics, there are a dozen denominations involved now -- Baptists, Lutherans, Mennonite & Brethren, Orthodox, Reformed, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists, United Church of Christ, United Church of Canada and United Methodists, But it is a lay couple movement which gets relatively little official church support from any denomination. And attendance at ME weekends has fallen from more than 100,000 couples a year in the late 1970s to only 20,000 couples in 1995. But the trend is reversible, In some areas with new leadership, Marriage Encounter is growing.

Denominational leaders need to take a second look at this movement and consider what they can do to reverse these numbers. One suggestion is to encourage clergy couples to make a weekend, and become trained as "presenting couples." The shortage of clergy

---

<sup>36</sup> "Worldwide Marriage Encounter National Survey" was conducted in 1990 by the National Institute for the Family, 3019 Fourth St., NE, Washington, 20017.

<sup>37</sup> For more detail on this 25 year retrospective, see pages 172-174 of *Marriage Savers*.

couples is a serious bottleneck for Presbyterian Marriage Encounter, for example -- and doubtless other denominations.

#### Retrouvaille: How to Save a Troubled Marriage

Catholic leaders of Marriage Encounter in Quebec noticed that a few couples who attended the weekends 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 called Retrouvaille (French for "Rediscovery,"), to help 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 share openly about how they overcame those problems, and thus serve as role models or mentors to attending couples on Retrouvaille weekends. But the technique of writing 10 minutes, and then talking in private about what each has written -- is the same as Marriage Encounter. Retrouvaille has swept across the border, and is now in 100 metro areas in the United States and has been attended by nearly 50,000 couples.<sup>38</sup>

Its results are spectacular. In Northern Virginia, a fifth of the 400 couples who have attended were already separated, yet 79% of the couples have rebuilt their marriages. In Michigan, a third of the 600 attendees have already filed divorce papers; yet 80% restore their marriages. Two-fifths of 817 couples in Fort Worth had already separated or divorced, yet 70% are still together.<sup>39</sup>

#### Marriage Ministry: a Church-Based

#### Retrouvaille

Marriage Ministry is a similar proven way to save couples headed for divorce courts -- but it is based in a local church. It began when Father Dick McGinnis of St. David's Episcopal Church in Jacksonville, FL said 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."

---

<sup>38</sup>For a complete list of local Retrouvaille leaders, phone numbers in each city and dates of upcoming weekends, see the "Retrouvaille Communique," a quarterly newsletter edited by Norm & Mary Moore, 2156 Lakeview Drive, #258, Ypsilanti, MI 48198.

<sup>39</sup>These estimates are from couples who lead Retrouvaille in the mentioned cities: Alicia and Bob Waning in Northern Virginia (703 351-7211); Mark and Betty Squier in Detroit (810 296-9589), and John and Lorraine Luna (817 267-9391). The number of Fort Worth attendees was as of 1993, and has grown since.

He did not know if any couples would come forward. But ten couples did so, out of a congregation of 180 people. McGinnis was thrilled. He told them, "I am overwhelmed trying to counsel all the troubled 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 wildly diverse. One woman had been in an adulterous affair for 8 years. One man was a bisexual, who once had homosexual affairs on the side. Another man was a ex-drunk.

However, those seven couples developed 17 Marriage Ministry action steps (analogous to AA's 12 Steps) on how to save a bad marriage. These steps, found on page 204 of *Marriage Savers* -- can be transplanted into any of America's 350,000 churches. And they are potentially more important than AA's 12 Steps because only a tenth of Americans are alcoholics, while more than half of marriages are failing. Examples of the "M&Ms:"

--Through other Christians' testimony and example, we/I found hope for our marriage.

--I made a decision to love: Christ, mate, self.

--We made a decision to stay together.

--I accepted my mate as he/she is.

--I realized the problem was with myself.

--I became aware I needed to change, became willing to change learned what and how to change, and began to change.<sup>40</sup>

For example, one woman said her husband was an alcoholic who lost his job, and was out of work 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 that she had a "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. That night, she was more amorous than she had been. He thought that was great. She could not change him. But she could change

---

<sup>40</sup>For a list of the Marriage Ministry steps, see p. 204 of *Marriage Savers* or write for "Marriage Ministry: Crossing Out Divorce" by the Rev. and Mrs. Richard McGinnis, Marriage Ministry, 6999-2 Merrill Road #283, Jacksonville, FL 32277, 904 724-2563.

herself, and as she did so, she inspired change on his part.<sup>41</sup>

Those seven couples have now worked with 40 currently troubled marriages, and they saved 38 of them. That's a 95% success rate with the most troubled marriages!<sup>42</sup>

#### Stepfamily Support Groups: Another Marriage Saver

Some 46% of all marriages today involve at least one person who was previously married. Those with stepchildren are the most explosive in America -- breaking up at an estimated 65% rate.<sup>43</sup> Stepchildren resent their new "parent" and know how to drive them out: "You are **not** my mother! You are the wicked stepmother who never lets us do anything."

Roswell United Methodist Church near Atlanta has created a major answer -- a "Stepfamily Support Group" led by those who have learned to make a blended family work. They mentor couples new to the problem, and have helped 230 out of 250 couples to be successful.<sup>44</sup> That is a 92% success rate.

Thus, a church which creates a Marriage Ministry and a Stepfamily Support Group can reasonably expect to save more than 90% of its worst marriages!

#### Community Marriage Policies Jump-Start These Reforms

There really are proven ways any church can be a Marriage Saver. All of the reforms described up to this point were created by others.

Only one reform is original with me. In my meetings with local clergy groups over a decade, I have challenged pastors to jump-start **all of these reforms in many churches at one time in what I call a "Community Marriage Policy" or "Community Marriage Covenant."**

The first to do so was Modesto, Cal. where 95 pastors from 21

---

<sup>41</sup>These principles for turning around a bad marriage are exactly the same as those identified by a non-religious therapist named Michele Weiner-Davis who says she can heal 85% of bad marriages in four or fewer counseling sessions. See her book, *Divorce Busting*, Summit Books, 1992. One Chapter title sums it up: "It Takes One to Tango: Change Your Marriage by Changing Yourself."

<sup>42</sup>The Rev. Richard McGinnis, in a January, 1996 interview.

<sup>43</sup>This is my estimate. All second marriages fail at a 60% rate according to Arthur J. Norton and Paul Glick's article in *Family Relations*, January, 1986. "One Parent Families: A Social and Economic Profile." Since those with stepchildren must fail at a higher rate because they so complicate a second marriage. I have seen no studies, but make the estimate that at least 65% will fail.

<sup>44</sup>This is an estimate by the program's director, the Rev. Dick Dunn, in January, 1996.

denominations signed a Modesto Community Marriage Policy in 1986. The clergy of another 44 cities have decided to create similar covenants across denominational lines. They range from Fairbanks, Alaska to Montgomery, Ala. and Louisville to Colorado Springs. On January 31, 1996, 252 pastors in Austin, Texas from 210 churches in more than 30 denominations signed what they called a "Community Marriage Statement," creating the largest such policy. What is their content?

In Peoria, clergy from 19 denominations adopted a covenant in which they stated:

Almost 75% of all marriages are performed by pastors, and we are troubled by the nearly 50% divorce rate. Our concern is to radically reduce the divorce rate among those married in area churches. It is the responsibility of pastors to set minimal requirements to raise the quality of commitment in those we marry. We believe that those who seriously participate in premarital testing and counseling will have a better understanding of what the marriage commitment involves.

What they agreed to was a minimum of four months marriage preparation, with at least four counseling sessions in which a premarital inventory is used and the training of mentor couples in each church "to work as role models and counselors with engaged couples." Pastors also agreed that they or mentors should meet with newlyweds twice in their first year of marriage. Further, they encouraged "all married couples to attend a couples retreat such as Marriage Encounter," and said the married clergy "should be the first to attend." Finally, they pledged to create a "Marriage Ministry of mentoring couples whose marriages once nearly failed, to work with troubled marriages."

Pastors from 17 denominations in Muncie, Indiana adopted a similar policy in February, 1996, but added this paragraph to their Preamble:

We also believe that the church has an ongoing responsibility to help strengthen existing marriages and save the troubled ones. "For I hate divorce, says the Lord God of Israel." (Mal. 2:16). What God has joined together, let the church help hold together.

#### Results of Community Marriage Policies

As clergy cooperate to deepen their commitment to marriages, the divorce rate can drop dramatically. When the Peoria Community Marriage Policy was signed in 1991, there were 1,210 divorces in Peoria County. Only one year later, they plunged to only 947

divorces. Thus, clergy accomplished their goal to "radically reduce the divorce rate," in only one year, and the rate has remained one-fifth lower than it had been in succeeding years. While this has not been achieved in all cities, the divorce rate fell by 11% in one year in Albany, Georgia.

That there would be any results in only one year is remarkable. It takes time for churches to train clergy and lay leaders. And there was no one-year change in some cities as Montgomery and Fresno. Why were there immediate drops in the divorce rate in some cities, but not others? Here is one possibility. I noticed that Peoria and Albany newspapers put this unprecedented collaboration of pastors across denominational lines on the front page, and local TV stations did stories -- which did not happen in Montgomery, for example. (A story was published, but was on page B-1.) When marriage saving makes front page news, people in struggling marriages may decide to invest more energy in making their marriages work. When the story was on page B-1, few saw it, so it could have no immediate impact.

This is evidence that it is possible to change the divorce climate into a marriage climate, if there is support from the news media.

What are the long-term results of Community Marriage Policies? Consider Modesto, California, the first city to adopt a CMP almost exactly 10 years ago. In the year it was signed, 1986, there were 1,923 divorces in Stanislaus County where Modesto is located. In 1995, there were only 1,606 divorces. What makes this remarkable is that the county's population grew 39% from 303,000 to 420,000. **Had divorces in Modesto simply grown with the population, there would have been 2,672 divorces -- not 1,606. Thus, Modesto is saving more than 1,000 marriages a year!**

Why Are Most Churches Failing Marriage?

One final question might be asked. Why are churches generally doing so little to strengthen marriage at the present time? In covering the religious denominations as writer of "Ethics & Religion, a nationally syndicated column, for 15 years,<sup>45</sup> I have heard the issues of marriage and divorce discussed **only twice** in state or national denominational meetings. (Mainline denominations expend their energy in debating homosexuality and political questions while evangelical denominations focus on abortion, evangelization and political questions.) Though divorce is considered a sin by all denominations, and the nation creates a million single parent families every year, marriage has been surprisingly largely ignored. Why?

There is a pervasive sense of hopelessness about marriage among the nation's clergy -- a sense that there are immutable forces

---

<sup>45</sup>My column "Ethics & Religion" is published by about 80 papers weekly. It is distributed by the New York Times Syndicate.

assaulting the institution of marriage over which they have no control. Clearly, movies and television have not only endorsed sex with anyone at anytime, but portray it with explicitness that is designed to be sexually arousing. In the face of so many hours of television every week about the joys of fornication and adultery, pastors wonder what an occasional sermon on chastity might be able to accomplish. Secondly, so many of their church members are getting divorced despite the best efforts clergy give in counseling -- that a grim sense of resignation has set in.

On the other hand, clergy seem blind to their own complicity. Organized religion fails at five levels.

First, many clergy do not have good marriages. One study reports that 72% of pastors' wives are unhappy. While they admire their husbands' work, they soon begin to see the church as a very demanding mistress, calling their husband away at any hour. Pastors take their wives for granted and do not invest the energy to keep their marriages fresh and alive.

Second, too many churches and synagogues are what Dr. Scott Bruzek, professor of theology at Valparaiso University, calls "ecclesiastical vending machines," which rent their sanctuaries and organs for weddings. Pay \$300, get a lovely church on Saturday, \$100 for the pastor and \$50 for the organist -- and out pops an instant church wedding. Most clergy today say they require premarital counseling. But when a 1989 Gallup Poll asked how many of once married people had received premarital counseling, less than a fifth said they had. Further, Gallup found that those who divorced and those still together "are equally likely (15% and 18%, respectively) to have had advance preparation or counseling for marriage."<sup>46</sup>

Thus, whatever marriage prep that does exist in 90% of churches -- is mostly worthless, as far as preparing couples for a life-long marriage.<sup>47</sup> What clergy call "premarital counseling" is often little more than getting acquainted and planning a wedding service. My wife and I were married by a bishop who spent 15 minutes in a "counseling session." He asked Harriet, "How are your parents?" To me, it was "What kind of work do you do?" With those questions easily answered, we were out of there.

Third, virtually no churches have programs in place consciously

---

<sup>46</sup>These findings are based on telephone interviews with 1,037 adults, 18 and older, who are married, widowed, or unmarried and involved in a romantic relationship. The Gallup survey was conducted between Sept. 24 and Oct. 9, 1988. Possible error, plus or minus four points.

<sup>47</sup>As noted above, a tenth of the nation's churches do have a more rigorous approach involving giving of a premarital inventory, with counseling based on an objective measure of a couple's needs.

designed to strengthen existing marriages. Church weekend retreats to enrich marriages, like Marriage Encounter, are not held by one church in 1,000. Fourth, most churches have no strategy to save marriages headed toward divorce. True, many churches do offer "counseling" for troubled marriages. But there is not a single study proving that church counseling of marriages headed for divorce is effective, according to Dr. David Larson, a research psychiatrist who is president of the privately funded, National Institute for Healthcare Research in Bethesda, MD.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, clergy largely avoid preaching on issues relating to marriage or divorce, perhaps because their own marriages are shaky. As the writer of "Ethics & Religion," I have had the opportunity to speak with cross-sections of clergy in more than 50 cities. I routinely ask pastors: "How many of you have ever preached on cohabitation?" Rarely does anyone raise a hand. I then ask how many had preached a full sermon on divorce. Only a few hands go up.

"You are part of the problem," I'll say, and open my Bible to read from Malachi, Chapter 2:

"And now, O priests, this command is for you. If you do not listen, if you do not lay it to your heart to give glory to my name, says the Lord of hosts, then I will curse your blessings; indeed I have already cursed them. ...For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But you have turned from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction."

And I'll often read a few verses further down, what Malachi says to everyone who divorces a spouse:

"You cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor at your hand. You ask, 'Why does he not?' Because the Lord was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Has not one God made and sustained for us the spirit of life? And what does he desire? Godly offspring. So take heed to yourselves, and let

---

<sup>48</sup>The National Institute for Healthcare Research is not part of NIH, despite the similarity of its name. But it is run by Dr. David Larson, a research psychiatrist at the NIMH for a decade. Its particular focus is on the impact of faith or religion on health and marriage. It routinely reads the scholarly literature and promotes scholarly research, and is funded primarily by the John Templeton Foundation. (For more information, call 301 984-7162.)

none be faithless to the wife of his youth. `For I hate divorce,' says the Lord the God of Israel."

On the other hand, I have been very encouraged that as pastors hear about the "Marriage Savers" outlined in this article, they want to see them implemented in their churches. The answers outlined here are not taught in seminary, nor are most denominations telling their clergy about them. Clergy are so delighted to hear that most marriages can be saved, that they are willing to join a Community Marriage Policy upon first hearing about it. Furthermore, the interest is as keen in liberal as in conservative churches.

The major problem is simply getting the message out to clergy that **churches can be marriage savers.**

#### The Marriage Savers Resource Collection

This is a nation of 400,000 churches that involve two-thirds of all Americans. What's needed is a conscious strategy to help thousands of those churches learn about the most effective ways to prepare couples for a life-long marriage, to strengthen all existing marriages and to save the ones headed for divorce courts.

Toward that end, I have created a *Marriage Savers Resource Collection* that includes three books and six videos which communicate these answers at different levels of need. Some 2,000 churches are already using the materials to acquaint couples with these proven marriage-saving answers. The *Collection* includes:

1. *Marriage Savers: Helping Your Friends and Family Avoid Divorce*, an expanded 1995 edition of my original book, published by Zondervan, with new chapters on "Helping The Separated, Divorced and Stepfamilies" and on "Couple Mentoring." It is 346 pages long, and includes an Appendix listing the names, addresses and phone numbers of each "Marriage Saver." It contains an Index to make it a useful reference work. In addition to outlining the forces breaking families apart, I spotlight a dozen proven answers, including changes in both marital and divorce law not reported here.
2. Six videotapes spotlight couples whose marriages have been enriched or saved from destruction by such proven steps as Marriage Encounter, Retrouvaille, etc. The creators of several of these programs -- PREPARE, Marriage Ministry and Stepfamily Support Groups -- explain them.
3. *Insuring Marriage: 25 Proven Ways to Prevent Divorce* is only 112 pages long, recently published by Zondervan. It is designed for pastors to give to couples who want

quick answers on how to choose a mate for life, deepen a flat marriage, save one headed toward the rocks, etc.

4. *Leader's Guide to Marriage Savers* is a 96-page outline of a 13 week course that any church could offer to train mentor couples which utilizes the videos and gives participants a choice of reading either *Marriage Savers* or *Insuring Marriage*.

Resource Collections are being distributed by the publishing arms of such conservative denominations as the Southern Baptist Convention and such liberal ones as The Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.<sup>49</sup>

#### An American Marriage Summit

However, at the present pace, only a small percentage of the nation's churches will be reached within a decade. Therefore I envision the possibility of an American Marriage Summit.

In February, 1996, Promise Keepers had a powerful Clergy Conference in Atlanta at the Georgia Dome attended by nearly 40,000 pastors. It was the nation's largest gathering of clergy, ever. Pastors of dozens of denominations made fresh commitments to God, their spouses and their children. What I envision is something like that to be held at RFK Stadium in Washington in September, 1997, a day or two before Promise Keepers stages a million man rally. Thousands of clergy would be planning to come to the rally anyway. They would simply come earlier to hear directly from those who have created the most effective marriage-saving strategies. That would plant these reforms in tens of thousands of churches -- and push down the nation's divorce rate dramatically.

If there were an American Marriage Summit, how's this for the meeting's banner:

**WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER, CHURCHES SHOULD HOLD TOGETHER.**

-----  
 Michael J. McManus writes "Ethics & Religion," a nationally syndicated column distributed by the New York Times Syndicate. He is the author of four books including: *Marriage Savers: Helping Your Friends and Family Avoid Divorce*, (Zondervan Publishing House, 1993, 1995) *Insuring Marriage: 25 Proven Ways to Prevent Divorce* (Lifeway, 1994, Zondervan, 1996). He has created most of America's 45 "Community Marriage Policies" involving clergy from many denominations with a conscious aim "to radically reduce the divorce rate." And he has created a Marriage Savers Resource Collection which

---

<sup>49</sup>For more information and prices of any of these materials, write the author at 9500 Michael's Court, Bethesda, MD 20817.

includes the two books above, six videos, and a 13 week Sunday School course, being distributed by publishing companies of diverse denominations. He and his wife, Harriet, have been volunteer coordinators of marriage preparation at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda since 1993.