

After the Wedding - Encouraging Couples to Grow

In order to follow up with couples my husband has married and with whom we have engaged in premarital counseling, we send them a personal note a year or so after the wedding, recalling fondly details of their wedding and any more recent experiences we have shared with them. We then ask how they are doing, noting that they have probably made some delightful discoveries and also encountered some challenges in building their life together. Reminding them of our previous offer to provide ongoing friendship and support, we ask if they would like to set a date to get together – sooner or later-- and if there are any particular issues they would like to work on. We also send a variation of this invitation to couples we have counseled in times of crisis.

When we meet, after catching up on what they have been doing, we might ask, “What has surprised you about being married?” or “What do you like about being married?” or “What do you find challenging...?” Whatever they disclose, we try to normalize their experience by assuring them that most marriages go through predictable stages, especially when the bliss of early marriage gives way to some disappointment and disillusionment. This second stage provides the opportunity and motivation to grow, and couples who stay together usually move on into a deeper, more connected relationship. The danger at this point is that couples may jump to the conclusion that they have married the wrong person, instead of trying to figure out what they need to learn and how to adjust in order to build a healthy and enduring marriage.

Sometimes we remind the couple of the “tasks of marriage,” which are discussed at length in the *Growing Love in Christian Marriage Pastor’s Manual* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013, pp. 54-58), asking which of these they might like to focus on for the next few months or longer:

- Establishing common goals and values
- Developing effective communication and conflict management skills
- Providing the necessities of life
- Managing finances
- Agreeing on roles and responsibilities
- Meeting personal needs (physical, emotional, spiritual)
- Deciding about parenting
- Adjusting to relatives and extended family
- Making and keeping friends
- Taking part in community life

Or we might give them the “Intimacy Checklist” from the Better Marriages Leadership Training Workshop Manual (Winston-Salem, NC: Better Marriages, 2011, p.7-24) and suggest they pick one type of intimacy (emotional, sexual, work, intellectual, recreational, financial, spiritual, etc.) to nurture in the months ahead.

Once a couple has chosen a goal for growth, we encourage them to brainstorm ways to foster that growth. We hand them paper and pencil and encourage them to think freely and write down every idea that occurs to them, resisting any initial negative reactions which might

discourage the brainstorming process. Even an apparently outrageous idea may trigger a more useful one! They might decide to read a book together or attend a marriage enrichment event, a financial planning workshop, or some other kind of seminar. They might get more intentional about date nights; decide to participate in a course, support group, or mission project; exchange roles for parenting or household tasks; or rethink how they schedule their days or relate to their extended families. We encourage them choose an idea – or several - they both agree on and decide how to implement it, who will do what and when. We also ask them to set a date when they will evaluate how they are doing and decide whether they want to continue this practice or try something different.

Once we know their interest, we might recommend specific exercises in the *Growing Love in Christian Marriage Couple's Manual* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013) or suggest resources from documents posted in the various sections of “Best Practices and Recommended Resources” at www.marriagelovepower.net (or search by at <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries>). Sometimes we recommend an event or workshop from the list of “Upcoming Events and Training Opportunities” also posted there. We might or might not set a date to meet with a couple again, but we definitely encourage them to have a similar conversation every year and to follow through with some activity that will enhance their marriage.

We intend this communication and consultation with us to help couples experience how they can intentionally foster growth in their marriage. If they live at a distance from us, we might invite them to take a more formal assessment, such as the free online tool at www.mymarriagecoach.com or the PREPARE/ENRICH Couple Checkup posted at www.marriagealive.com (\$35). Or we might refer them to www.PREPARE-ENRICH.com to find a facilitator to administer and interpret that inventory for them. By providing opportunities and tools for them to reflect on their relationship, set goals for growth, and choose ways to work toward their goals, we hope to encourage couples to strengthen and enrich their marriages.

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