

Developing a Marriage Ministry in Your Church

Charlene Giles, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist serving as Director of the Marriage Ministry at Asbury United Methodist Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, recently shared with me a list of suggestions based on her twenty years of experience there. These do's and don'ts might prove helpful to other congregations who want to strengthen marriages. Perhaps smaller churches could work together to implement these ideas.

Do's

- *Form a Marriage Council including couples of all ages/ stages. Decide how frequently to meet and what you would like to accomplish. We have eight couples, each responsible for a particular segment of our Marriage Ministry, who meet twice a year to share victories and concerns. These couples seem to appreciate the fact that we don't meet too often, and they work really well together. We discuss which couple needs are currently being addressed and which are not, and how biblical principles might apply. We review recent church events and classes to determine which activities to start, stop, or continue. Shortly after each full council meeting, a subgroup meets to determine specifically which groups and classes to offer in upcoming semesters and who will teach or facilitate each. We try to offer experiences for varying levels of need - from general interest to marital distress - and challenge - from low-threat table discussion to more intense groups in which sharing is expected and couples are asked to pray together daily.*
- *Choose a scripture passage and mission statement for your Marriage Ministry. Our verse is Hebrews 13:4a: "Marriage should be honored by all..." Our vision statement reads, "Through Christ, growing healthy marriages that last a lifetime."*
- *You could launch your Marriage Ministry by hosting an event featuring a respected speaker or entertaining DVD series. This event could be planned by your Marriage Council or might be used to recruit members to serve on it.*
- *Consider inviting a licensed marriage and family therapist to be part of your Marriage Council. Because you will often need to make decisions regarding referrals, you will benefit from professional assistance when determining whether couple enrichment is appropriate or whether more intensive measures are indicated.*
- *Discuss with young couples whether or not it is important for your church to offer childcare for marriage events, and require advanced registration for this service. Because we had been told it was very important, we recently budgeted for free childcare for up to 75 children for a Friday evening and all day Saturday event. We were surprised when only ten children were enrolled!*

- *Budget for purchase of books and materials that can be circulated from a resource room or church library. We also set up a scholarship account to assist couples who cannot afford the complete cost of an event. We do, however, ask them to pay what they can.*
- *Find a way to honor couples in your congregation who have been married many years. We celebrate couples married 50 years or more on the Sunday before Valentine's Day. Church members deliver a corsage to the wife of each such couple on Saturday, and on Sunday each couple's name is read aloud during the church service. After worship we serve a banquet, complete with all the trimmings. Last year we honored nearly 200 couples for having been married over 50 years. Our longest married couple had been married 70 years.*

Don'ts

- *Don't try to do everything at once. It's better to start small with excellence, gradually increasing and expanding your marriage ministry. We began with a "Couple-2-Couple" ministry for engaged couples, which now has 35 married couples who open their homes for up to eight meetings each with a total of over 50 engaged couples a year. We have developed training materials for the Support Couples, teaching materials for those who lead the 20 hours of training, and a workbook for engaged couples called Preparing for a Marriage That Lasts a Lifetime. Contact me if you would like to learn how your church might utilize these resources (cgiles@asburytulsa.org.)*
- *Don't forget the power of scripture and prayer for your Marriage Council and as the focus of each event and class you offer. God's word is powerful.*
- *Don't feel your church needs to stick with one program or class forever. We have found that when we give a class a "break," we experience renewed interest in it when we offer it again later.*
- *Don't ever think you have "arrived." New marriage materials are being created all the time. Each year you might send a couple from your Marriage Council or one that is willing to participate on the Council to experience a new (to you) marriage program. You can also conduct computer searches and sign up for free e-newsletters. Some program developers and organizations will send you curriculum kits for a free review period. A group of churches could share the cost of materials to be shared by all. (Visit <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries> and www.marriagelovepower.net for best practices articles and resources that United Methodists have used and recommended.)*

- *Don't be in a hurry to rotate couples off your Marriage Council. If they have a passion and gifts for this ministry area, allow them to serve until God leads them elsewhere. Early on, because we had a more rigid "term" system, we lost some very talented folks who were hard to replace. On the other hand, don't neglect seeking and recruiting future leaders, especially from younger generations.*
- *Don't forget to have fun! If your participants rave about what a good time they had, others are more likely to give your programs a try. Many, especially men, tend to resist marriage enrichment events or anything that threatens to be too "touchy-feely" or to deal with uncomfortable emotional issues. If your ministry becomes known for teaching helpful information in a humorous way, more people will be willing to attend.*

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