

Strengthening Marriage and Family Ministries in Your Area

The church has long affirmed the primacy of both our relationship with God and our relationships with other persons, sometimes using the cross to symbolize the intersection of these “vertical” and “horizontal” commitments. Jesus condensed the Law into two commandments: love God and love your neighbor. Learning how to relate better to our "neighbors" can, in fact, strengthen our relationship with God and is of utmost importance to our spiritual growth.

In addition, many agree with Kay Hymowitz, author of *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age* (2006), that the breakdown of marriage and the rise in divorce, cohabitation, and unwed parenting contribute to the downward mobility of families. The church, then, in its mission to end poverty, must include intentional efforts to strengthen marriages and families.

Comprehensive marriage and family ministries which develop awareness of and empathy for self and other, along with skills for communication and conflict management, are, in my opinion, among the most important emphases of the church. By "comprehensive" I mean that everyone is included, regardless of age, marital status, or family configuration. Perhaps "relationship ministries" would more clearly communicate this inclusiveness; but we want to affirm the central role marriage plays in family formation. Omitting the word "marriage" might appear to deny its importance.

Not everyone will marry, of course, and we affirm singleness as an appropriate choice for some people and a result of life circumstances for others. Singles, however, also belong to families -- their families of origin and families of their own choosing -- and they are part of communities which include married couples. Stable, healthy marriages strengthen communities and contribute to the well-being not only of their immediate families, but also of the institutions, organizations, and social groups to which they belong.

Time and again I have heard persons trained in marriage enrichment, parent education, divorce recovery, or other relationship-related programs bemoan the fact that their local churches, districts, and conferences demonstrate so little interest in and commitment to such offerings. Sometimes churches even pull families apart by encouraging lay persons to take on so many and such demanding leadership roles that their spouses and children feel neglected. Not only do we need to equip and encourage all configurations of families to be more intentional about their family life, we also need to provide education and enrichment experiences to prevent and heal family breakdown.

Many of us who feel called to marriage and family ministries are motivated by gratitude for experiences that have helped us overcome childhood and adult experiences of broken and dysfunctional relationships. By working together, we can bring marriage and family ministries into the spotlight and empower our annual conferences to make these ministries a priority. I have been working in the New England Conference, where I live, to discover ways to make this happen. Here are some suggestions, based on my experiences, for how to proceed. These are not

necessarily in the order in which you might choose to implement them, but some may be done simultaneously and others in an order convenient for you and those working with you.

1. First, find out who in the conference office has Marriage and Family Ministries in his or her portfolio. Contact that person to express your interest and to inquire about what may already be happening.

2. Volunteer to work with whoever may be promoting and supporting such ministries, or offer to take on that role if no one is already doing it. Ask for a title (Marriage and Family Ministries Coordinator? Team Leader? Consultant?) and create a job description, if necessary. Be sure someone in the conference office is designated as your contact.

3. Find out how to post information in the conference e-newsletter or newspaper. Write a brief statement of your interest in marriage and family ministries and invite people to contact you with information about their interest, training, and experiences.

4. Look in the “United Methodist Marriage and Family Ministry Directory” document posted at (www.marriagelovepower.net, www.gbod.org/marriage, or www.gbod.org/family) to find persons in or near your area who are trained in various programs relevant to marriage and family ministries: Better Marriages, Marriage Encounter, Active Parenting, Divorce Recovery, etc. Invite them to work with you to strengthen marriage and family ministries in your area. The Resource persons in the Directory are listed by annual conference and jurisdiction, but be sure to look in nearby areas as well. When you discover other persons in your area not already listed in the Directory, be sure to let me know so that I can contact them and invite them to be listed.

5. Inquire around the conference to find out what churches are offering effective programs to strengthen families. Keep your eyes and ears open. Search the conference website, local church websites, and church newsletters. Wherever you are and whenever you have the opportunity, ask what churches are doing to strengthen families. Build a data base of persons who seem interested, as well as a “Speakers’ Bureau” list of persons who have relevant training and experience and might be willing to provide leadership or consultation.

6. Depending on your training or experience, volunteer to lead workshops or make presentations on marriage and family ministries in general or on specific aspects: parenting, relationship education for youth, or divorce recovery. Find out if there will be Learning Centers or workshops at annual conference or district events and offer to provide or recruit leaders for relationship-related topics. Use these opportunities to expand your list of interested persons, recording their names, addresses, phone numbers, email contacts, and specific interests or experiences. Add all of this information to the data base described in step 5 above.

7. Enlist someone to create a poster and display for use at annual conference, district events, and other workshops. Always include a sign-up list for persons who would like to receive more information.
8. Find out how the conference sends out its mailings. If there is a data base, can you get permission to submit names for coding so that you can send directly to those who are interested? If a conference agency uses Constant Contact or some other email program, can you get permission to set up a marriage and family ministries mailing list through it?
9. Check with the annual conference resource library for available materials suitable for small group study, programs, and individual study. Review as many as you can and share those reviews on the conference website. These can also be placed on display tables as described in #7 above. If there is a seminary in your area, check that resource center as well.
10. Request permission to post information to the conference website. Ask for a link on the conference site, where you can share information about upcoming events, resource persons, and materials available through the conference resource library and other institutions in your area.
11. Continue to share information about upcoming events and training opportunities in or near your area through the conference newsletter and website or through emails sent to your data base list. See the “Upcoming Events and Training Opportunities” document posted at www.marriagelovepower.net or search by title at <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries> for ideas, focusing on events in or near your area.
12. Keep cycling through these steps, recruiting other persons to take responsibility for different tasks, such as maintaining the Speakers’ Bureau, Upcoming Events List, etc. As you increase awareness of the need and possibilities, share stories of churches offering effective marriage and family ministries. You might create a document describing “Marriage and Family Ministries Around the Conference,” for example. Refer individuals and churches to the “Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources” documents on a wide array of marriage and family ministry-related topics posted at www.marriagelovepower.net or search by topic or title at <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries>
13. Finally, let me know how things develop in your area so that I can share that information to inspire and encourage others.

Nurturing and healing relationships, strengthening families, and developing supportive communities that serve as extended families effectively undergird our mission to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” [*The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2012*, (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, page 91, ¶120.]

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