

Why I am Passionate About Marriage and Family Ministries

My parents divorced when I was nine years old, and my father pretty much disappeared from my life, except for very occasional cards and notes. Nobody explained to me what was happening, as I remember, and I learned about the divorce by overhearing my mother explain to my two older brothers why we were moving. We left New Jersey, where we had been living, and went to live with my grandfather in Maine. Only later in life would I realize that his ability to provide a home for us prevented the economic disaster faced by many single-parent families.

Equally influential was the role played in my life by the small Methodist church where I joined the active youth group and was surrounded by adults who loved me, inspired me, guided me, and otherwise filled in the gaps for my broken family. In my teens I began to get involved in district, sub-district, and conference events and was hired to work summers in the craft shop at the conference church camp. I felt a call to ministry, but I also wanted to marry and have children; and at that time – in the '50s - I saw no married women pastors for role models..

Happily, the young man with whom I fell in love decided to become a minister. I rejoiced that I could have it all: marriage, children, and a ministry as a pastor's wife. However, we did not exactly “ride off happily into the sunset,” as I had anticipated, thinking marriage would solve all my problems and anxieties. After about ten years, although we generally thought of ourselves as blessed and happy, I occasionally found myself unreasonably discontent, irritable, and prone to slamming cupboard doors. Cliff didn't understand my anger, and actually I didn't either. We had three amazing children, were serving a wonderful local church, enjoyed many friendships, and had so much to be thankful for. Cliff usually retreated from my angry outbursts, as he had not yet learned to "active listen" - just as I had not yet learned to give "I messages,"

Fortunately we had an opportunity to participate in a marriage enrichment retreat. That event – and others we have attended through the years - changed our marriage and our life. Having grown up in a family that didn't talk about feelings, I had been struggling to suppress and often tried to blame someone else for my inexplicable anger. I was surprised to find out that anger is a perfectly normal human response, indicating that something needs attention. I learned to tune in to my anger to figure out what I need and to express my feelings and needs without attacking or blaming. Cliff learned to stay present when I seem upset, to ask with empathy if I need something. We went home and began to live a transformed life, as we practiced "I messages" and "Active Listening" with our children and in other relationships as well.

That event took place almost 50 years ago. We went on to become Certified Marriage Enrichment Leaders and Trainers through the organization now called Better Marriages (formerly the Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment). Every time we participate in or lead a marriage enrichment or relationship education event, we still learn something new about ourselves and about the emotional baggage we brought into our marriage – my fear of abandonment and Cliff's uncertainty about how to deal with a woman's feelings. We learned – and continue to learn how to express love deeply and openly, how to share our feelings and needs, and how to manage the conflicts that are inevitable in any intimate relationship.

When Cliff was elected to the episcopacy, we wondered if we would be able to continue leading marriage enrichment retreats and training events. As it turned out, we found couples eager for the training. They discovered that the experience not only gave them skills to share with others, but improved their own relationships as well. In the meantime, through several acts of grace, I was invited to compile a collection of stories about marriage ministry for the General Board of Discipleship. I had always wanted to be a writer, and after completing that project, *Couples Who Care*, I proposed a second collection, *Couples Who Cope*, and proceeded to write and publish that as well. Then came the opportunity to write a spiritual guide for volunteers in mission, as well as another contract for the second edition of the *Growing Love in Christian Marriage (GLCM) Pastor's Manual*, which Cliff and I revised and updated together.

Working on the *GLCM Pastor's Manual*, which focused primarily on marriage preparation, deepened my growing conviction that it is not enough for a church to offer effective pre-marital counseling and education. If we are serious about “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,” we must equip people to build and nurture healthy relationships. In order to slow the trend toward family breakdown and mitigate its devastating effects on our communities, churches can offer relationship education for children, youth, and adults; marriage preparation, education, and enrichment; and ministries for families in crisis, transition, and special situations. Singles, too, are part of families and a vital part of the extended family that is the church. I began to develop an annotated list of various resources recommended by United Methodists around the connection, now grown into an extensive compilation of “Best Practices” articles and resource lists, still in process. I also began collecting and collating contact information for persons trained in various kinds of relationship ministries, creating a United Methodist Marriage and Family Ministries Directory. The Directory, articles, and resource lists are posted at www.marriagelovepower.net and at <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries> (search by title or topic) along with a list of Upcoming Events and Training Opportunities and other helps. Discipleship Ministries now pays me a small stipend for researching, writing, and updating these documents and for responding to inquiries from individuals and churches.

The church made a huge difference in my life, serving as an “extended family” and providing the relationship education and support I needed. I find a deep hunger within our churches and communities for skills-training and support systems to strengthen families and help individuals understand themselves more fully and relate more effectively with others. It delights me to connect with persons already providing or seeking information about effective relationship education and enrichment ministries. Please contact me with your questions and share with me information about your ministries with marriages and all kinds of families, including singles.

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