

Marriage Mentoring

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A well-trained and resourced team of couples serving as marriage mentors can greatly expand and enhance your marriage ministry. Mentor couples offer a unique peer relationship and a couple-to-couple dynamic of support that pastors cannot provide on their own. By recruiting and training mature couples who are in growing relationships to work with engaged and newlywed couples, churches can provide outstanding support for those in the early, formative stages of their relationships. Some churches offer training through mentoring programs or through curriculum (see resources below). Some train their mentors to administer a premarital inventory and to discuss the results with their assigned couple(s). Others train mentor couples to specialize in ministries with those in later stages of marriage and with those with special needs, such as new parents, parents of teens, or couples facing retirement. Some churches train mentors who have come through a crisis, such as infidelity or addiction, to work with couples facing similar challenges. Mentor couples do not function as counselors or therapists. They offer peer-level caring and sharing, alongside services provided by a pastor or pastoral counselor.

What Mentor Couples Do

Mentor couples work with engaged and newlywed couples to explore a variety of issues: marriage goals and expectations, communication, conflict resolution, financial planning, household roles, faith issues, and spiritual practices. They reinforce the strengths of the couples with whom they work, while modeling and teaching the communication skills needed for enduring, fulfilling relationships. A mentor couple usually meets privately with the engaged or newlywed couple assigned to them, but may also participate in planning and leading group sessions, such as seminars on communication, conflict-management, or financial planning. They also participate in regular team meetings for ongoing training and support.

The planning team usually recommends a minimum number of sessions and specific procedures for mentoring, including a premarital inventory or other curriculum to guide the process. Some materials are as simple as Dr. Gray's [*12 Conversations*](#). Asbury UMC in Tulsa, Oklahoma, has, over the years, developed its own curriculum. Some established program developers provide complete packets with video-based training sessions and workbooks for participants. The [*Growing Love in Christian Marriage Pastor's Manual*](#) describes three basic sessions as a minimal commitment. Mentors often attend the weddings of their mentees and develop an ongoing, supportive relationship with them.

How to Start a Marriage-Mentoring Ministry

Whether clergy- or lay-initiated, a marriage-mentoring ministry needs a leadership team to plan, implement, and supervise the program. The [*Growing Love in Christian Marriage Pastor's Manual*](#) (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013) devotes an entire chapter to mentor couples, including information for initial planning, recruiting mentor couples, training, organizing and assigning mentors, supervising, and evaluating. To provide maximum support to the mentor couples, the team might include a trained pastoral counselor who can assist with the planning and training and offer ongoing consultation as needed. The team will need to clarify boundaries around confidentiality, and couples being mentored should know from the beginning what personal information will be shared with the pastor and/or other members of the team.

The program will require a budget of several hundred dollars for training, resource materials, and other incidental expenses.

Recruitment

Invite couples who demonstrate a strong faith, who have been married for at least five years, and who appear to have a healthy, growing relationship to participate in this unique and richly rewarding ministry. If possible, recruit a variety of couple types, in terms of age, years married, with and without children, in second marriages, and from different backgrounds. You might want to establish this ministry in cooperation with other local churches in order to provide a wider range of mentors to choose from for particular situations. Describe clearly both expectations and the support that will be provided.

Training Mentor Couples

Mentor couples need solid training in the use of appropriate materials, as well as in the interpersonal skills they will demonstrate and teach. Mentor couples should know how to facilitate the engaged or newlywed couple's learning process, rather than preaching to or lecturing them. Training can be offered as a series of weekly evening sessions or for longer blocks of time on weekends. Trainees should commit to attend all sessions, with the understanding that each person may miss no more than a limited number of sessions. Training classes with at least four and up to ten mentor couples provide the best group dynamics. Mentor couple training should include ample use of experiential activities, role-play, and hands-on practice. Such activities, especially if built around various situations that may actually arise while working with their assigned couples, help mentor couples feel more comfortable and confident. A comprehensive training program might include the following:

Basic information:

- The purpose and structure of the ministry.
- Role distinctions for minister, counselor, and mentor couples.
- The importance of confidentiality.
- Forms and procedures for assignments, initial contacts, record keeping, evaluation.

Relationship building for mentor couples

- Completion of a relationship inventory, such as ENRICH or REFOCCUS.
- Activities from workbooks they will use with the engaged/newlywed couples
- Other couple communication exercises.

Skill development

- Communication, especially empathic listening
- Working as a team and dealing with challenges.
- Using the workbook material or other exercises.
- Avoiding the dangers of triangulation and taking sides.
- Deciding when to refer a couple for professional help.

Ongoing Supervision and Evaluation

During regular team meetings, mentor couples can share what seems to be working well and concerns they may have about the process. Encourage them to check in with the counselor or other support person available to them as needed. Request feedback from the couples being mentored, and amend the program as needed. Commission the mentors during worship and invite the congregation to support this ministry through prayer and practical support, perhaps by providing refreshments and childcare.

Resources for Marriage Mentoring Ministries

PREPARE/ENRICH (www.prepare-enrich.com) is a scientifically proven program for use by mentor couples, clergy, counselors, or relationship educators with engaged or married couples. The customized relationship assessment, which is completed online, identifies a couple's strengths and areas for growth. The trained facilitator(s) provides four to eight feedback sessions to help the couple understand and discuss the results, while teaching them proven relationship and communication skills. Find a training event on the website or register for online self-training. Better Marriages (www.bettermarriages.org) also offers PREPARE-ENRICH training.

Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott: This husband-wife team founded the Center for Relationship Development on the campus of Seattle Pacific University in 1991. Visit www.lesandleslie.com for resources for marriage mentoring programs and other related ministries, including a schedule of program presentations and counseling services. The *Marriage Mentoring DVD Kit* contains everything you need to launch a marriage mentoring program: a nine-session training and recruiting DVD, *The Complete Guide to Marriage Mentoring*, a *Marriage Mentoring Leader's Guide*, *51 Creative Ideas for Marriage Mentors*, a *Marriage Mentoring Training Manual for Husbands*, and a *Marriage Mentoring Training Manual for Wives*. You can also purchase the *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts DVD Kit* for complementary materials and many other books with healthy relationship advice written from a Christian perspective, access tools for self-assessment of a relationship, and sign up for devotional emails.

Growing Love in Christian Marriage Third Edition Pastor's Manual, by Jane P. and S. Clifton Ives and *Couple's Manual* by Joan and Richard Hunt (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013). Chapter eight of the *Pastor's Manual* provides information for initial planning, recruiting mentor couples, training; organizing and assigning mentors, supervising, and evaluating this ministry. The *Couple's Manual* includes a relationship inventory and a wide variety of exercises that would work well both for training the mentor couples and as a resource for them to use with their assigned mentees.

Marriage Mentoring: Twelve Conversations by Dr. Edward A Gray, LMFT. Dr. Gray has created a unique "12 Conversations" model for marriage mentoring, which pairs a younger couple with a more mature couple in a healthy relationship. Couples meet once a month for a year, developing friendship through guided conversations about marriage, sharing stories about the blessings, realities, and challenges of marriage. The conversation guides prompt sharing on a number of topics. Mentor couples do not need to be professional counselors or have "perfect" marriages, but should be willing and able to share stories of their own married life and what they have learned through experience in regard to nurturing love, relating to in-laws, playing together, handling money, communicating effectively, solving problems, balancing family and work, raising children, fostering intimacy, planning for the future, and celebrating the holidays. Suggestions for organizing the program, recruiting and training mentors, and providing ongoing support are included in the Discussion Guide and at the website under "Starting Your Program." You can purchase a *Leadership Training Kit*, complete with training DVDs, a training manual, and sample copies of various specific *12 Conversations* guides (*Dating Couples*, *Health Challenges*, *Military Couples*, *Senior to Senior: Life After 60*, *Caregivers*, and *Grief and Loss*) at the website, along with other helpful materials. Visit the website www.12conversations.com or

contact Dr. Gray at 901-681-9200 or egra@harding.edu for more information. Also available in Spanish, Korean, and Russian.

Marriage Savers (www.marriagesavers.org) This organization offers several resources for mentoring programs. At the website, click on [Store](#). You can download a free brochure titled “Marriage Mentoring Matters,” for use in explaining the program and recruiting mentors. You can also purchase an e-book download titled *Marriage Savers Prepare-Enrich Couple’s Workbook for Pre-marital Couples* and other resources, including *A Manual To Create a Marriage Savers® Congregation (REVISED)*, price currently reduced from \$50. to \$25 (183 pages, with 150-page appendix). This is the definitive manual by Mike McManus, a step-by-step guide to creating the best mentor programs -- premarital, mid-marriage, troubled marriage, separated couples and stepfamily ministries. Contact Marriage Savers at 301-978-7108 or Mike@marriagesavers.org for information about training.

Contact Information for Some of the United Methodist Churches Offering Marriage Mentoring and for Ecumenical Marriage Mentoring Programs in which UMs Participate:

Asbury UMC, Tulsa, OK – Charlene Giles, 918-392-1145, cgiles@asburytulsa.org

First Things First, Chattanooga, TN, 423-267-5383

First Things First of Greater Richmond and Marriage & Relationship Coaching Center of

Central Virginia – Bob Ruthazer, 804-402-1210, bobruthazer@gmail.com

Bob and Diane Ruthazer - 804-402-8004, bob@FirstThingsRichmond.org,

Frazer UMC, Montgomery, AL – Mike & Ginny Dietvorst, 334-395-4095,

dietvorst@mindspring.com

Grace UMC, Cape Coral, FL – Trey and Jana Barclay, Jana@wavemediasolutions.com

Hedgesville UMC, Hedgesville, WV – Hugh and Judy Erskine, 304-754-8425,

Judyerskine1@aol.com, Hugherskine1@aol.com

Live the Life Ministries, Tallahassee, FL – Richard Albertson, 850-668-3700,

Richard@livethelife.org

New Fairfield UMC, New Fairfield, CT - Jerry and Jane Serfass, 203-746-1585,

Jerryserfass@earthlink.net, Janeserfass@earthlink.net

Waleska UMC, Waleska, GA – Eddie and Sylvia Robertson, 770-479-8575,

robertson.waleska@gmail.com, www.eddieandsylviarobertson.com, also

“Eddie and Sylvia Robertson Marriage Enrichment” on Facebook and Google Plus

For more information, visit www.marriagelovepower.net and click on “Best Practice Articles and Recommended Resources,” scroll down for Marriage Preparation, Marriage Education and Enrichment, and Ministering with Those in Crisis and Transition, etc.

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