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A Community Marriage Policy

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The Ministerial Association of Merced, California, has recently adopted a Community Marriage Policy. After several months of discussion, a significant number of pastors have signed a covenant which will ensure that couples will find a uniform marriage policy throughout Merced.

Rev. Jody Kranz and I, representing Merced United Methodist Church, have signed the covenant. Other participating denominations include Presbyterian, Baptist, Evangelical Free, Assembly of God, Christian Reformed, Missouri Synod Lutheran, Episcopalian, Four Square, several independent churches, plus the Roman Catholic parish.

The Community Marriage Policy is based on the assumption that it has been too easy to get married! People have spent more time preparing to obtain their driver's license than preparing for their marriage. A community-based policy makes it tougher to get married by raising standards for marriage preparation.

The mission of the Community Marriage Policy is:

- * To help couples prepare for a marriage relationship in the context of a right relationship with God.
- * To lower the divorce rate.
- * To help couples who do stay together to experience more of God's plan for intimacy and growth in their marriage.

Minimum expectations of the covenant include:

- * A waiting period of four months from the initial marital appointment until the wedding date.
- * A minimum of four premarital counseling sessions that will include a relational instrument, inventory or test.
- * Teach biblical doctrines of morality, marriage, and divorce. Discuss principles of married life from the perspective of biblical truth and counsel.
- * Encourage couples to participate in seminars such as Engagement Encounter.
- * Provide, as needed, a mature married couple to mentor the engaged couple to assist in marital bonding.
- * Commit to the counseling of couples throughout their marriage.

Guiding Principles of the Marriage Policy:

- * God has established and sanctified marriage for the welfare and happiness of the human family.
- * Jesus Christ declared that "a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one."
- * The apostles instructed those who enter into the marriage relationship to cherish mutual esteem and love, to share in each other's infirmities and weaknesses, to comfort each other in sickness, trouble and sorrow, to provide for each other and for their household, to pray for and encourage each other, to live together as heirs of the grace of God, and to raise children, if there are any, in the knowledge and love of the Lord.
- * The prophet Malachi declared that God hates divorce. In Ephesians 5 we are told that the image of marriage is that of Christ and His church.☛

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Marriage Savers

On January 28, 1986, 95 pastors in Modesto, California, did something unprecedented. In a remarkable mea culpa, spiritual leaders there noted that three-fourths of marriages "are performed by pastors, and we are troubled by the nearly 50 percent divorce rate." The result was the Modesto community marriage policy. [The participants] decided that if a couple wanted to get married in any local churches of 19 denominations, the pair would have to undergo four months of marriage prep, take a premarital inventory, and meet with "a mature married couple" to help them bond for life.

The ministers were attempting a local solution to a national problem. The United States has the world's highest divorce rate. . . Yet two-fifths of Americans worship weekly, and two-thirds of Americans are members of a church or synagogue. . . Organized religion marries three-fourths of all Americans.

In a movement that has spread since its modest beginnings in Modesto, clergy and laymen in communities around the nation are cooperating to jump-start similar community marriage policies. . . . Where implemented, the results of these programs have been astonishing, and secular leaders are starting to take notice.

--From "The Marriage Savers" by Michael J. McManus (*The World & I*, November 1997).