

# HOW CAN THE CHURCH NURTURE *Healthy Marriages?*



On New Years Day, the "Today Show" solicited comments from the "people-on-the-street" asking which relationship in their lives they would most like to improve. The answer of almost 87% of those questioned was that they would like to improve their relationship with their spouse. One gentleman said, "I have a good marriage but I just want to add a new depth to it." In one statement he had defined the very embodiment of the Marriage Enrichment organization. This is a program for couples in good marriages who want to improve them and add a new depth to the relationship.

Having been participants in the program for over 15 years, we know what a positive change the Marriage Enrichment experience can have on a good marriage. We had been married for 16 years and felt that we had a good marriage. We were raising 3 children, went off to work every day, and played with friends, never realizing the connection that was missing. On our first Marriage Enrichment weekend, we were very

apprehensive about talking about our "problems" or "issues." In that weekend we learned that our "problems" and "issues" were not unique. We shared the same communication inadequacies, the same conflicts, and the same doubts as every other couple there. We learned that good communication skills are the heart of every good relationship and that without those skills, couples are ill equipped to deal with the daily conflicts that are bound to arise during a marriage.

The marriage of a couple is the marriage of two individuals who bring to the marriage every part of themselves that makes them that unique individual. Some

of what we bring to our marriages is bound to cause anxiety and tension between partners. The Marriage Enrichment program provides the forum for discussing conflicts, getting in touch with the individual in each of us, practicing "active listening" as well as good communication.

The greatest fear expressed by couples when approached to attend a Marriage Enrichment weekend is the fear that they will be required to "air our dirty laundry." Most who have attended have found that to be far from true. Every exercise, every group debriefing is begun by stating that each person participates only as much as he or she desires. One of our leaders said a prayer before each session. In his prayer he would remind us that as we participated in the activity, we walked on sacred souls and he asked that we "remove our shoes and walk gently." That prayer expresses the love and respect brought to every session. We have learned the importance of centering our relationships in God and the church. With the support and encouragement of pastors,

there are many ways a local church can support work to make good marriages better. In our experience, planning these activities is an excellent way to involve lay leadership in the life of the church.

Contact a Marriage Enrichment or Marriage Encounter leader in your state and ask about a weekend retreat or other programs available in your area. If none are planned, ask about sponsoring a retreat weekend for your church using trained leader couples provided by one of these groups.

On a smaller scale, consider starting a Marriage Enrichment evening at your church or in one of the homes of the interested couples. You will be surprised how enriching just a couple of hours can be when the topic of marriage is explored and discussed. Communication, conflict resolution, goals for the future, rekindling romance, sharing family responsibilities and family finances are only a sampling of the topics of interest to most couples. Many times these evening programs can grow to a day-long program. Why not invite a professional with experience in relationships and/or counseling to speak to the group? Pastoral counselors and marriage counselors are only two suggested types of speakers.

Whether a church group starts with a weekend led by trained leader couples or sets aside a couple of hours for an evening program, the effort will be well worth it. Good, healthy marriages do not happen by accident and a commitment by a couple to work on improving their good marriage and adding a new depth to it will pay tenfold in the rewards that are reaped. Working with the support of the church, the couple achieves added strength. As couples work together with other couples who are committed to the experience, they strengthen their own relationship and create new bonds of love and friendship with the other couples in the group. The church is then enriched as a result. Everyone is a winner.

Two good resources for establishing programs are *The Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment* (see p. 29) and *Couples Who Care* by Jane P. Ives.



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The following are some “Dos” and “Don’ts” for individuals interested in forming a Marriage Enrichment group:

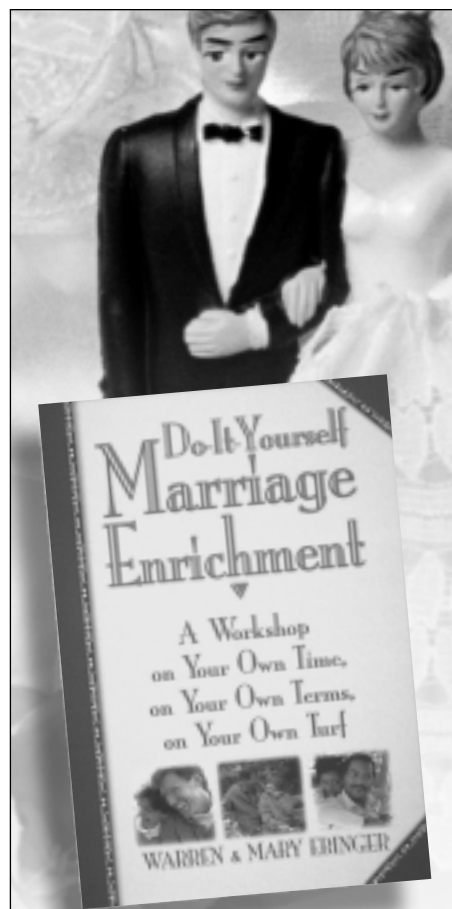
#### DO:

- Stress that ME is not marriage counseling or saving a marriage that has run into marriage roadblocks. The whole idea is making good marriages better;
- Give plenty of lead time to plan and publicize the program. Personal invitations from other couples who have participated in the past work best;
- Keep inviting . . . sometimes it takes a while to convince couples of the benefits;
- If planning your own program, rely on good resources and materials. A good two hour program will accomplish more than a longer one that is unorganized;
- Encourage support of the couples with children who have to obtain childcare in order to devote energy to their relationship.

#### DON'T:

- become exclusive. Keep asking new people to be involved;
- try to accomplish too much during one program. Select a topic or theme;
- be afraid. Help is always available. Ask and you shall receive.
- discriminate based on age. We have had couples from 20 years to 70 years of age and couples married a few months to couples married more than 50 years.

By promoting Marriage Enrichment within your church you are not only promoting longer lasting marriages, but you are strengthening the very heart of your church. □



#### Marriage Enrichment for the Do-It-Yourself Crowd

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