

Steve and Rita Sowers

Helping a Marriage Last a LIFETIME

Have you ever wondered why some marriages last for a lifetime? I (Rita) had parents who divorced when I was seven. I didn't understand, but I well remember moving out of our home and into my grandmother's home. I attended a small high school and very few in my class were from a "broken home." When Steve and I became serious in our relationship, I searched for God's wisdom so that our relationship would last for a lifetime. I was very frightened of my marriage ending in divorce like my parents. Steve on the other hand had two parents who loved each other very much. His parents' families were in loving and devoted lifetime relationships. I searched for ways to assure that kind of relationship for us. My search led us to Worldwide Marriage Encounter.

We attended a Roman Catholic Worldwide Marriage Encounter weekend in 1978 in Indiana. (Marriage Encounter—United Methodist began in October of the same year in New York, Kansas and Colorado.) It was a beginning of a new journey for our relationship. We had been married 8½ years and had experienced the normal issues and struggles of married life, as well as the added stress of infertility and adoption. Marriage Encounter weekends are for couples who have good marriages and would like to find deeper romance, commitment, and intimacy. In 1981, we began helping to expand Marriage Encounter—United Methodist weekends in Indiana. Through this effort we met wonderful loving couples and began to understand this was a

community to which we wanted to belong. The weekend experience also brought us back to the church and our commitment to God. Marriage Encounter—United Methodist's mission is: "Building Better Marriage Relationships, Making the World a Better Place."

Engaged Encounter

As a result of our experience in Marriage Encounter, we began to see the need for ways to support and supplement a pastor's premarital preparation. In 1990 we attended an Engaged Encounter—United Methodist weekend to observe the weekend and consider becoming a presenting couple for Engaged Encounter. An Engaged Encounter weekend is a time for powerful couple communication about the issues they will face after the wedding. The weekend encourages the couples to look at their relationship by focusing on their marriage for a lifetime, rather than their upcoming wedding. As a result of their Engaged Encounter experience, some couples choose to delay their wedding date and others to call off their wedding. We discovered that even after 19 years of marriage, the Engaged Encounter weekend was a powerful, life-changing experience for the two of us. We presented our first weekend in 1991.

Our commitment to helping engaged couples has also led us to become active in the Sponsor Couple Program for Christian Marriage Preparation, a pro-

gram developed by our local church. We have recruited couples with 13-60 years of marriage to be sponsor couples to couples before their marriage. Each sponsor couple meets 5 times with an engaged couple and follows a structured but casual program using a workbook. The program helps both couples to understand the background we bring into our marriage, principles of effective communication, the intimacy of marriage, and our covenant of life and love. The engaged couple also bonds with a couple in the local church, who continues to nurture them in their lifetime journey.

Steve continues to inform couples, either on Engaged Encounter weekends or during our Sponsor Couple program, that the greatest gift a man can give to his children is to love their mother. The only way we learn to truly love is through our wonderful God who gave us the gift of love and taught us the power of loving unconditionally.

Seeing the Results

One young couple from our church reminds us of the incredible value of Engaged Encounter and the Sponsor Couple program. We presented for their Engaged Encounter weekend as well as serving as their Sponsor Couple. We discovered that we shared similar family backgrounds. We grew close and they honored us by asking us to participate in their wedding. Their first year of marriage was quite a roller coaster ride. Within three months of their marriage

he lost his job, she could only find substitute work, they had to relocate for a new job, the job didn't work out, and they moved once again to a new job. They later reminded us that we did not tell them how hard the first year would be!

They also told us that the best part about their Engaged Encounter weekend and the sponsor program was the knowledge that they could rely on us later in life to share both the joys and struggles they experience. They have found a church home and are being loved into their new community of faith. What a joy it has been to see their marriage be strengthened as their faith deepens.

We remember hearing that marriage is like a precious painting. Through the years it may age, but when you polish the painting, the hues and colors begin to shine. So it is with marriage, and as the years pass we must take advantage of every opportunity to re-energize our couple relationship. Such efforts will strengthen our love for God, each other and those who we love. We encourage every couple preparing for marriage and those who are married to give each other time to experience re-energizing their couple love. □



Steve and Rita Sowers of Noblesville, Indiana, have been married 32 years. They have 2 daughters and a son-in-law. Steve is an industrial engineer and is currently pursuing an M.A in Counseling Psychology. He teaches an adult Sunday school class at Fishers United Methodist Church, Fishers, Indiana. Rita is an R.N. who works as a senior claim consultant for medical matters, a staff nurse in the local hospital maternity center and a volunteer facilitating a grief support group for neonatal loss families. Steve and Rita are currently the National Engaged Encounter Executive Lay Leaders for Marriage Encounter—United Methodist (See p. 29 for details).



Discipleship Resources has published a selection of marriage resources designed to foster these aspects of marriage. You could call these books "relational nutrition" for couples who want to continue to grow in love, faith, and commitment to one another.



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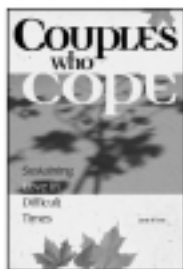
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