

Putting Away the Face of Perfection

Anne Rex



I have been married for 26 years and 22 of them have been the happiest years of my life.

For those of you who have been married for any length of time, I suspect these words ring true and clear, although the percentage of happy years may differ.

Our married life has been full of ups and downs, times when I did not like Gary very much and (though my ego hates to admit it) times when he did not like me. I remember vividly the night I was prepared to ask Gary for a divorce. How did we make it through? Only by the grace of God.

We, like so many other couples, put forward the face of perfection. Our marriage was perfect on the outside, but that was an illusion. I find that most married couples are unwilling to admit this reality of marriage. Afraid to admit publicly, and for some even privately, that things are not hunky dory, that their marriage is less than perfect.

It was much later in our married lives, while serving a church in Charleston, West Virginia, that Gary and I experienced a marriage enrichment weekend. Twelve couples from the church I served took the time to spend a weekend talking about our marriages. There were some

large and small group activities, but most of the time was spent as a couple talking about our own issues.

It was not easy to recruit couples to attend. The women thought it was a good idea; their husbands, however, could think of much better things to do. The thought of sitting and talking about their feelings was more than they could handle. But our leaders were prepared. The first thing we did was watch a video segment from the television show, "Home Improvement." Here we watched how Tim handled himself at a marriage enrichment event. It broke the ice and we were all able to acknowledge that we needed this time for ourselves and our marriages. After that weekend, it seemed natural for us to do smaller events around marriage enrichment. Sunday School classes and various evening events were planned.

Couples in Trouble

During this time I found that my counseling was increasing with couples who

were in trouble. Unfortunately most of these couples were in desperate trouble and needed a miracle to save their marriages. As I continued to work with these couples, I was more and more frustrated by my vow of confidentiality. Why? Because I felt that if these couples could come together and talk with one another, share experiences and ideas, they would make important discoveries.

First, they would discover that they are not alone. This is the main reason couples don't come forward. They feel that they are the only ones dealing with marital problems. Second, they could put away the face of perfection for a while and be who they really are. With other couples who were also struggling, they did not have to pretend they were anything they were not, least of all perfect. Third, they could learn from one another and, most importantly, support one another, no matter what.

I asked my couples during their individual counseling sessions if they would be willing to come together with other couples in trouble. Originally they were apprehensive but the more we spoke about the positives in coming together, the fears about "not being perfect" fell away.

I was apprehensive about our first meeting, but "God is good all the time." Each couple shared extensively and every-

one listened and cared for each other. After 3 hours together, they named themselves the “Honeymooners” and asked that my husband join us for our future monthly gatherings.

We met in each other’s homes and the host couple provided food while I provided the work for the evening. We began by reviewing everyone’s status. For example, when we began, one couple was living apart but by our third gathering, they reported that they were living together again. This was an especially joyous time for all in the group.

We would also share how we had done with the “h o m e w o r k” assigned at the previous meeting. When I invited guests to come and

speak, they were aware that they needed to be prepared to give homework to all. I remember one occasion when we were to practice time outs to help deal with conflict. One couple had been in time out for over a week! We certainly had a good laugh with them. We learned from doing the homework, and we learned from each other.

The topics for our gatherings were suggested by our discussions. We invited guest speakers to teach about communication skills, conflict, and dealing with crisis; we worked with marriage inventory forms that helped identify individual issues; guest couples shared how they had weathered crisis; and other guests shared about divorce. Our evenings, though very intense, were grounded in the knowledge that we were not being judged by anyone present and that God’s love was evident in all we did.

Play was also an important part of the group. Not only did we have some play time in our gatherings, but couples would plan family activities together outside of these evenings. They also worshipped together and were in touch with each other in between our gatherings.

Two Important Statements

Each couple involved in this process made two important statements about

the group work with the “Honeymooners.” First, whether they saved their marriages or not, they felt this was the most beneficial, positive thing they had done for their marriage and for themselves. The freedom to come together and talk honestly and openly with other couples was a great gift. They learned from each other and learned to care for others in new ways. The support they received from the other couples made a difference in whether or not they even continued working on their marriage.

Whether they saved their marriages or not, {each couple} felt this was the most beneficial, positive thing they had done for their marriage and for themselves.

Second, they wished they had begun counseling or working with a group long before crises hit their marriages. Two of the couples realized

that they had begun too late. All the couples said it would have been a gift for their marriage had they invested time in enriching their marriages early on.

As a result of their involvement with the “Honeymooners,” two couples remain married and their marriages are richer than ever. The two couples who divorced have greater respect for their ex-spouses, and have worked toward a less painful separation. Three of these couples have agreed to be available to share their experiences with other individual couples or groups.

Marriage Ministry Re-examined

It is not only the couples who have learned and changed. I have re-examined some of my thoughts about ministry with couples because of the “Honeymooners.”

- 1 Pre-marital counseling has become even more important. With divorce rates at 50% and growing, the time we spend with young couples cannot be wasted. Pairing the couple with a couple who have been married for several years is very helpful. It is an opportunity for the married couple to be honest with the young couple about their marriage.

- 2 Couples in crisis need to know that they are not alone and that they don’t have to be perfect. They need to hear this and experience it in a variety of ways.

- 3 Marriage enrichment programs are vital to the health of all marriages. We need to help marriages before they get into crises. Couples need to continually learn about tools available to help their marriages be successful.

- 4 Marital problems exist in every congregation. We need to offer programs even if we are not aware of any problems. Preventative maintenance is the key to success.

- 5 Group work, no matter how much effort is involved, is an awesome gift.

In June 2001, I was appointed to a new church. As I work on beginning a marriage ministry, the question of how to get the couples to come forward is ever present. Unfortunately it is usually only when a crisis arises that we are called upon. Marriage is not easy and clergy have a great opportunity to work with couples in a variety of settings to help save marriages.

As a general rule, it is not difficult to locate support for marriage enrichment activities or groups. We don’t have to reinvent the wheel. Use your clergy colleagues. Most of the guests invited to the “Honeymooners” were clergy couples or clergy who were certified in special areas. They were invaluable to me in this work.

Other resources I have used include (see p. 29 for details): Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment (A.C.M.E.); REFOCCUS (Relationship Enrichment Facilitating Couple Communication, Understanding and Study) an inventory used with both groups or individual couples; and Marriage Savers (Mike McMaunus), which offers strategies for staying married.

After talking to many folks and taking a look at a variety of programs, I took what I needed to meet the needs of those I served. This work has changed my life, my marriage, and my ministry. □

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