

PROACTIVE MARRIAGE COUNSELING: A LOOK AT THE WELS APPROACH TO  
MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT

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## ABSTRACT

Marriage is foundational to society and the Church. In a world in which marriage is not only losing its meaning but also its value, it is important that the church continues to help God's people keep Christ's love at the center of their marriage. Throughout the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, pastors are experimenting with ways of bringing God's principles of marriage and Christian service into the day to day lives of the couples in their congregations. This paper will examine the resources and programs used to bring the timeless truths concerning marriage to the modern Christian. It will weigh potential options for pastors who serve in unique contexts and present the strengths and weaknesses of those possibilities. This thesis serves as an encouragement to, in some way, take a proactive approach to marriage counseling.

## INTRODUCTION

Marriage is one of the most generous blessings God has poured out on his creation. God gave his creation the gift of this intimate partnership in which men and women can share their lives with one another and glorify him. At the same time, marriage is difficult. It is difficult in the lives of pastors, and it is difficult in the lives of their members. Since the fall of Adam and Eve, every marriage in all of God's creation has faced its challenges and hurdles. For thousands of years, imperfect marriages have been forced to overcome issues like misconceptions, infidelity, lack of respect, and miscommunication. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the problems are no different. Members in Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) churches are forced to take on these same bear-trap issues that have caught the ankles of many marriages. Even worse, these Christians so often realize they are stuck in the same trap that has taken down so many couples around them.

Certainly, this does not call for panic. God has made clear that he has not left his people to fight their battles alone when the Apostle Paul says, "For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds" (2 Cor 10:3-4 ESV). The question is not, "Are there weapons that can be used to combat the attacks on marriage?" The question is: "How can these weapons be used to combat attacks on marriage?" This is the question that will be addressed in this paper. There are couples in WELS churches facing attacks against their marriages by the devil, the world, and their own sinful flesh. How can pastors equip their people to practically fight those attacks using Christ as their sword and shield?

The first reaction might be, “Do just that. Put Christ in front of them.” Certainly, that will be the driver of this paper. Christ put marriage principles on perfect display in his example of self-sacrificing love and service in life and in death. He gives married couples a reason to show love to one another in the love that he first showed to them. However, to go from an intellectual knowledge of Christ’s love for you and your spouse to one that penetrates your day to day interactions with one another can be strenuous. It can take time, teaching, and even some practice. The purpose of marriage enrichment is to take a proactive approach to counseling. In many cases, couples wait to do intentional work on their marriage until they are in crisis. The programs discussed in this paper are intended to discuss and resolve marital issues before they transform into seemingly insurmountable obstacles. In this way, a congregation can be proactive rather than reactive in their approach to marriage.

This paper will seek to address resources that will bridge the chasm that can exist between knowing how your marriage should reflect Christ’s love and putting that knowledge into practice. It will examine the challenges facing couples that exist inside and outside of their marriage. There are issues of communication and expectation that exist within a marriage driving a wedge between two Christians. External forces imposed by society that call into question the purpose and necessity of commitment and marriage also exist. The first chapter will paint a broad picture of the obstacles that face a typical Christian couple.

The books and programs currently available to WELS pastors will be explored. These resources will be divided into two basic groups: literary resources and materials used by WELS pastors for marriage enrichment. It will examine the benefits and drawbacks of using resources that are not uniquely Lutheran as well as suggest ways in which those resources can be utilized.

Finally, the paper will suggest ideas for marriage enrichment opportunities for those in unique contexts and possessing different skill sets.<sup>1</sup>

I pray that through this paper, you will gain a certain appreciation for marriage enrichment. Certain ministerial contexts better lend themselves to utilizing some types of marriage enrichment programs than others. I pray that you see the need for the Wisconsin Synod to continue to pursue the creation of resources that are scriptural, confessional and useful to its pastors and members. Marriage issues loom large in the lives of married Lutherans. They can deeply affect the faith life of even the strongest of members. For this reason, I pray that you consider implementing some of the resources discussed in this paper in your congregation or in your own marriage.

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1. The goal of this paper is not for a Seminary student, with no pastoral experience, to give his own thoughts and ideas of what a pastor “should do” with regard to marriage enrichment. Instead, the goal is to examine the work being done by men in the ministry who have made marriage a significant part of their work. These men have dedicated time and effort to creating marriage enrichment programs. The goal is to put their ideas in one place and suggest ways in which they can be utilized more broadly.

## CURRENT STATE OF MARRIAGE

To say that the institution of marriage is “under attack” would be an understatement. Gone are the days in which a marriage was simply attacked from the inside. Modern Christians who find themselves in challenging moments in marriage are called by society to consider the value (or lack thereof) of the institution itself. Working through marital issues is not simply about overcoming the sinful nature that resides within a husband or a wife that says, “You should not have to deal with this.” There is a second opponent: a world which tells the Christian, “You do not have to deal with this.” Couples are being forced to consider the usefulness of their marriages. When a marriage encounters difficulty, the default is no longer to do anything possible to preserve it. Rather, it frequently is to give up and blame the marital agreement as antiquated. They question the practicality of a lifelong partnership with one person rather than recognizing the sin that resides on both sides that is making the marriage struggle. Herein lies a challenge and an opportunity for pastors to use these bumps in the road to assist in creating a stronger marriage.

### **Marriage in Modern Society**

Permit a personal anecdote that paints a pertinent picture of marriage through the eyes of a typical twenty-something. A few months before the writing of this paper, I found myself in a car with my fiancée and an extended family member. He was raised Roman Catholic, but his attachment to the church had all but disintegrated. When he was reminded that we were a few

weeks from getting married, his first question was, “How long have you been living together?” Not “if” we had lived together, but “how long.” Upon hearing that we had not lived together, he was stunned. He could not imagine a circumstance in which two people would get married without first cohabitating.

A Gallup poll from 2020 asked this question: “When a couple plans to spend the rest of their lives together, how important is it to you that they legally marry – very important, somewhat important, not too important or not important at all?” In 2006, fifty-four percent of the people surveyed answered that it was “very important.” In 2013, that number dropped to forty-three percent and in 2020 the number stood at thirty-eight percent.<sup>2</sup> The author of the article on the study writes, “Americans’ attitudes about marriage continue to evolve, with fewer saying it is important for couples to marry if they have children together or if they want to spend the rest of their lives together. These trends are consistent with changes in U.S. attitudes on a variety of moral values issues, which have moved in a less traditional direction over the past two decades.”<sup>3</sup>

In a survey on those “moral values issues,” Gallup found that seventy-three percent of the people asked said divorce was “morally acceptable.”<sup>4</sup> While it is unfair to generalize that number and assume that all seventy-three percent of those people see frivolous divorce as morally acceptable, the number paints a picture of a society that sees divorce as a significant option in life. Andrew Dugan of Gallup writes, “But both of these trends— the falling rate and rising acceptance of divorce— are likely signs of a larger, more significant shift: society’s changing

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2. Gallup Inc, “Is Marriage Becoming Irrelevant?,” Gallup.com, December 28, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/316223/fewer-say-important-parents-married.aspx>.

3. Gallup Inc, “Is Marriage Becoming Irrelevant?” 2020.

4. Gallup Inc, “Americans Hold Record Liberal Views on Most Moral Issues,” Gallup.com, May 11, 2017, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/210542/americans-hold-record-liberal-views-moral-issues.aspx>.



attitudes regarding marriage.... As US adults come to see marriage differently than in the past, it seems natural that they will view divorce differently too. It may be that both marriage and divorce are no longer viewed in moral terms, but rather seen as legal or formal processes.”

A study conducted by Shelby Scott at the University of Denver in 2013 examined the reasons couples give for divorce. The study surveyed fifty-two divorced couples who had gone through Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), a secular marriage enrichment exercise that focuses on building communication skills. The most cited reason for divorce, given by seventy-five percent of individuals and at least one person in ninety-four percent of couples, was a “lack of commitment.” The article includes a quote from a participant stating, “I realized it was the lack of commitment on my part because I didn’t really feel romantic towards him. I always had felt more still like he was a friend to me.”<sup>5</sup> This quote underlies the misconception with which some couples enter marriage: commitment must be directly linked to emotion. This way of thinking eats at the foundation of marriages. Instead of seeing commitment to a marriage as an unbreakable vow promised before God and spouse, couples correlate their commitment level to their wavering affinity for each other. In a society that more commonly finds divorce acceptable and for couples who increasingly see commitment as contingent upon romance, Christians can't help but be influenced by unscriptural attitudes which can lead to false justifications for ending their marriage.

It is important to recognize what all of these statistics mean. First, they do not mean that marriage itself is fundamentally more difficult. Ever since the Fall, every human, apart from Christ, is born into sin. As a result, every marriage is made up of two sinners living under the

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5. Shelby B. Scott et al., “Reasons for Divorce and Recollections of Premarital Intervention: Implications for Improving Relationship Education,” *Couple & Family Psychology* 2, no. 2 (June 2013): 131–45.

same roof with two different ways of approaching issues. A couple in 2021 will face the same selfish urges that their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents faced. Second, modern couples find themselves in a culture in which giving up on a marriage is normal and, in many cases, celebrated. Young men and women have grown up in a culture in which they don't understand the fundamental elements of a marriage. James Dobson writes,

Part of the problem is that many couples come into marriage having had no healthy role models in their formative years. If 50 percent of the families are splitting up today, that means half of the marriageable young adults have seen only conflict and disillusionment at home. They have felt the apathy and heard the piercing silence between their parents. It's no wonder that today's newlyweds often sputter and fumble their way through early married life.<sup>6</sup>

Young couples misunderstand marriage's blessings, challenges, and purposes and therefore find themselves seeing this "commitment" as conditional. Because exiting a marriage is socially acceptable, the urge exists to make it an early option rather than a last resort.

While the institution of marriage and its purpose have not changed since its institution in the Garden of Eden, mankind's approach to it certainly has. For thousands of years, a main component of marriage was preserving a family name and securing the family's wealth and status. A husband wanted a wife that came from a good family so that their families could merge and solidify their standing in society. They would then fulfill their duty to having children and raising them for the betterment of society. Fast forward to the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century and in American culture, marriage often has little to do with duty. Author and Presbyterian pastor Timothy Keller wrote:

Older cultures taught their members to find meaning in duty, by embracing their assigned social roles and carrying them out faithfully. During the Enlightenment, things began to shift. The meaning of life came to be seen as the fruit of the freedom of the individual to choose the life that most fulfills him or her personally. Instead of finding meaning

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6. James C Dobson, *Love for a Lifetime: Building a Marriage That Will Go the Distance* (Sisters, Or.: Multnomah Publishers, 1998), 16.

through self-denial, through giving up one's freedoms, and binding oneself to the duties of marriage and family, marriage was redefined as finding emotional and sexual fulfillment and self-actualization.<sup>7</sup>

In many cases, a 21<sup>st</sup> century spouse is praised for their "self-care" and is told "you need to do what is right for you." This view moves sacrifice out of its central position in marriage and places it in the periphery. Modern American culture undermines the idea of sacrifice by calling for it only when it is convenient for the spouse to do so.

While there are several issues facing modern Christians, two are evident in the lives of those who are or will be married. In the media, pop culture, and even in their social circles, men and women wrestle with the question: "Do I need marriage?" Increasingly, the answer given is "no." Timothy Keller writes about his experience with those who object to marriage. He lists their misguided excuses, "Marriage was originally about property and is now in flux, marriage crushes individual identity and has been oppressive for women, marriage is 'just a piece of paper' that only serves to complicate love, and so on."<sup>8</sup> These complaints are a direct result of the second issue facing modern married Christians. They misunderstand the intention and purpose of marriage. A view of marriage that looks only for self-fulfillment and self-gratification to the detriment of service dooms a couple from the start.

Marriage enrichment is an important ministry because of the lies that plague marriages and young people grow up believing. Over the last fifty years, the institution of marriage has been disfigured in American culture. Some young couples are a generation or two removed from a household in which healthy and lasting marriage was modeled. That means they have grown up knowing little else besides dysfunction and divorce. Older couples are facing the same questions

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7. Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 21.

8. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 4.

concerning the validity and necessity of marriage. This is a place in which a pastor has the ability to offer information and assistance based upon the Gospel.

### **A Pastoral Perspective on Modern Marriage**

One of the questions asked of the interviewed pastors was, “Why marriage?” They were asked to explain why marriage enrichment became an intentional part of their ministries. Pastor Randy Hunter explained one of the issues facing modern marriage saying, “It used to be we thought the assault on marriage was divorce... for ten years, the assault on marriage has been ‘It’s outdated, it’s old fashioned we don’t need it.’”<sup>9</sup> Pastors are seeing the same issue that the Gallup polls found. People do not feel as though God’s institution of marriage is useful or even necessary in the western world.

Pastor Timothy Dolan of Immanuel in Greenville, when asked how much work he does proactively in engaging with couples on marriage enrichment versus the amount of reactive counseling he does, said, “I have hardly anyone coming to us for counseling; we have quite a lot just telling us they’re getting divorced.”<sup>10</sup> Pastor Hunter has noticed a similar trend in that few people approach him with counseling issues. There are two potential explanations for a lack of counseling. Perhaps a member may avoid coming to their pastor due to a lack of desire to have the church or pastor involved in their marriage. For their own reasons, they have decided to take on their issues themselves. The other reason for a lack of reactive counseling is marriage enrichment. If husbands and wives are spending time actively working on their marriage when it is not in crisis, they find themselves in crisis less frequently. Pastor Hunter proposes, “The more

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9. Randy Hunter, interviewed by author, Zoom, October 21, 2021.

10. Timothy Dolan, interviewed by author, Zoom, October 27, 2021.

time you put into that kind of growth, the less marriage counseling you do. I don't think it's because we've eliminated sin, but I think we have given people tools."<sup>11</sup>

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Professor Thomas Kock works with the WELS on some of its new marriage resources. He emphasized marriage's role in a church saying, "You want to have good church leaders in your church? Where do they get really trained to be a good church leader? By how they are a husband and a father. Because that's where they learn to do, in very practical terms, unselfish Christ-like love, caring for other people, putting other's needs before their own. That's exactly what you're looking for in a leader of the church."<sup>12</sup> Professor Kock is touching on a blessing that comes from working on marriage at a congregational level. When looking to strengthen the fiber of a congregation, the first relationship that ought to be examined is the one that is tested and depended upon for spoken forgiveness each day.

Pastor Aaron Boehm in La Mesa California sees a similar impact of marriage enrichment on church life saying,

"View marriage as the biggest potential ally that we can have in every other area of ministry in our congregations. Have good marriages and you will have all kinds of tools and allies, partners to pursue whatever other avenue in ministry you want to give attention to. But you skip that, then we're missing out on strengthening or establishing the strongest foundation in our congregations, I think, between husband and wife."<sup>13</sup>

By helping create stable homes and marriages, a congregation can thrive in many other areas of ministry because members become stronger partners to one another. Strong couples are good for the ministry of the church.

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11. Hunter interview.

12. Thomas Kock, interviewed by author, October 25, 2021.

13. Aaron Boehm, interviewed by author, Zoom, November 9, 2021.

WELS pastors recognize the state of marriage in 2021. The battle between new man and old Adam persists in every relationship in life. Marriage is no exception. In a culture in which marriage is losing its value, a church has the blessed opportunity to make their marriages what they ought to be: a microcosm of the self-sacrificing love that Christ showed his church.

### **Scriptural Exhortation to Strengthen Marriages**

Scripture is clear in its depiction of marriage. Jesus, speaking on the topic of marriage, says to the Pharisees, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matt 19:4-6). Christ frequently emphasizes love and unity among believers, but never quite like this. He speaks of Christians being parts of the same body, but he says that married couples are “one flesh.” There is a profound unity that exists in marriage, created by the man and woman’s vows before God and human beings and solidified through the blessing of intimacy between a husband and wife. At points in a couple’s life, they may find keeping that unity to be effortless. At other points, the stranger next to you feels like anything but your “flesh.”

A husband and wife cannot expect their marriage to remain untarnished by sin. Marriage enrichment programs, when blessed by God, have the ability to prepare a couple for difficult moments. When given the tools, Christians can approach marital difficulty armed with the word of God and practical applications of that Word for resolving their conflicts. Marriage enrichment opens a godly conversation in which men and women have the ability to talk about marriage problems before those issues become overbearing or insurmountable. In opening a dialogue

about marital issues prior to them taking shape in a relationship, sinful habits, behaviors, and ways of communicating can be rooted out before they do irreparable damage to a couple.

One strength emerging from intentional marriage enrichment is the community fostered within the process. Congregations who speak about the challenges and triumphs of marriage together have the ability to build one another up. In the Christian life, this is a tremendous asset as the writer of the Hebrews says in chapter ten, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb 10:24-25). God recognizes the human need for mutual encouragement and support as they press on toward the day he returns. At times marital difficulties can have a way of isolating both husbands and wives. Being open about day to day struggles allows members to learn from each other, build stronger relationships with one another, and fosters an environment in which brothers and sisters struggle together under the cross.

“Marriage reflects the gospel.”<sup>14</sup> It can serve as a refuge in which a husband and wife can find their needs being selflessly met by another without expectation of direct repayment. Spouses can serve each other as they speak in an honest way about sin. A wife holds the ministry of the keys that Christ gave to her and forgives the sins of her husband. A husband has the opportunity to sacrifice his desires, comfortability, needs and life for the partner with which God has blessed him. Unconditional love, forgiveness, and service stand at the heart of the gospel. Those same God given blessings are at the heart of marriage as well. The apostle Paul writes:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that

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14. Hunter interview.

he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph 5:22-27).

In marriage husbands and wives exemplify the love their Savior has for them. Marriage enrichment uses the Word to give couples the tools to reflect the gospel. When taking the gospel of Jesus and intentionally applying it to the basic issues that arise in marriage (money, sex, communication, etc.), husbands and wives can more effectively reflect the gospel in their daily interactions.



## LITERATURE REVIEW

The following resources were recommended by the pastors interviewed for this thesis. The first set of resources are books, both secular and spiritual, that WELS pastors have used to help formulate their marriage enrichment programs. The review explores the potential usefulness of these books for WELS pastors and members as well as the circumstances in which they could be utilized. It discusses the pastor's ability to inject the Gospel into otherwise law-driven marriage issues. The second set of resources are teaching tools that pastors and congregations use in the synod. These are online resources used by pastors to address marriage in their congregations.

### **Secular and Spiritual Books<sup>15</sup>**

There are countless books written on the topic of marriage. In order to narrow the scope of research, the only books examined in this paper are those that have been recommended by WELS pastors. Most of the books are spiritual in nature without being uniquely conservative Lutheran. The conclusion of this section of the paper will address a pastor's role in providing and applying the gospel to the principles these books propose.

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15. All literary titles in the headings will include bibliographical information in both the notes and the bibliography.

*The Meaning of Marriage* by Timothy Keller<sup>16</sup>

In his book, *The Meaning of Marriage*, Timothy and Kathy Keller introduce their readers to the founding principles and purposes of marriage. As a Presbyterian minister, Keller bases his writings about marriage on grace. Keller writes about service in a marriage saying, “Why would this be true? It is because marriage is ‘instituted of God.’ It was established by the God for whom self-giving love is an essential attribute, and therefore reflects his nature, particularly as it is revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ.”<sup>17</sup> Keller sees self-sacrifice as one of the main pillars of marriage. Therefore, much of his book speaks about God’s plan of service in marriage and practical means by which a couple can carry out those acts of service.

*The Meaning of Marriage* is a useful resource for young couples looking to understand God’s purpose in instituting marriage. However, Keller does not limit his audience. He also addresses single people in his writing, recognizing the importance of understanding marriage when searching for a partner. Herein lies the strength of his book. Keller doesn’t give a bulleted list of things someone can do to strengthen marriage. Instead, he links the Gospel to marriage and illustrates ways in which it manifests in day to day life.

Keller’s book could readily be used by a WELS pastor in multiple ways. Both small groups and couples could use this book in their study of marriage. Young single people and couples would both find benefit in seeing the Christian view of marriage held up in direct juxtaposition to that of the world. A pastor can put this book in front of his people without being concerned of doctrinal error. It should be noted, however, that some of Keller’s exegesis and the paths by which he draws his conclusions may differ from that of a WELS pastor. For this reason,

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16. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*. See note 7 for full information.

17. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 58.

a pastor would be well served to use *The Meaning of Marriage* as a way to discuss marriage in the church.

*Friends, Partners and Lovers* by Kevin Thompson<sup>18</sup>

The power of *Friends, Partners and Lovers* is found in its ability to address common pitfalls in a marriage. While Kevin Thompson serves as a pastor at a non-denominational church, his book takes on marriage from a mostly secular perspective “using solid biblical principles.”<sup>19</sup> The “biblical principles” to which he refers are used implicitly throughout his book. The book is not geared toward giving couples a picture of marriage in the context of faith. Instead, Thompson calls couples to nurture their relationship in three ways: as friends, as partners, and as lovers.

*Friends, Partners and Lovers* serves as a tool to examine a marriage that has stagnated in one of the three distinct areas. At the end of each chapter, Thompson asks questions that are meant to provoke thoughts and discussion between couples. Thompson writes, “Love demands difficult conversations. Issues cannot be ignored. Feelings must be communicated, opinions must be presented, and frustrations must be expressed. For an improvement, difficult conversations must take place.”<sup>20</sup> This book serves as a springboard and a guide for conversations to take place between a husband and wife as they work through the material together.

Because of its lack of Scripture references, *Friends, Partners and Lovers* is not a book that is well suited for a Bible class. However, the principles and questions on which it operates could be utilized in a marriage presentation. The idea of growing in these three areas over the life

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18. Kevin A. Thompson, *Friends, Partners, and Lovers: What It Takes to Make Your Marriage Work* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Revell, 2017).

19. Thompson, *Friends, Partners, and Lovers*, book jacket. His description of the book’s intent.

20. Thompson, *Friends, Partners, and Lovers*, 128.

of a marriage need not only be a secular conversation. These are growth areas in which couples can reflect the Gospel toward one another. *Friends, Partners and Lovers* provides building blocks for the creation of a short marriage enrichment program that allows established couples to examine their marital health.

*Love for a Lifetime* by James Dobson<sup>21</sup>

James Dobson approaches marriage as a psychologist, marriage counselor, and Christian. He speaks about marital topics as a way of preparing young couples for issues that will come up throughout life. He specifically indicates who this book is written for saying, “This book was written to provide that needed guidance. It is addressed specifically to single adults, engaged couples, and to husbands and wives who have not yet celebrated their tenth anniversaries. It focuses on the principles and concepts that will help armor-plate a marriage and equip it to ‘go the distance.’”<sup>22</sup>

*Love for a Lifetime* was originally published in 1987. There are some places in which the writing is dated. The issues couples face remain the same, but the modern application is different. However, Dobson does an outstanding job framing the underlying issues that are at the heart of marital conflict. By systematically going through a list of common relationship issues (premarital sex, differences between men and women, expectations in marriage, finances, sex), Dobson speaks to general couples and allows them to apply Christian principles to their specific issues.

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21. Dobson, *Love for a Lifetime*. For full note see note 6.

22. Dobson, *Love for a Lifetime*, 12.

Despite an overtly Christian packaging, a weakness of Dobson's book is the lack of gospel motivation. While he names God as the author of marriage and family and calls people to a life of service, he does so without specific and consistent empowerment from the redemptive work of Jesus. For this reason, *Love for a Lifetime* may not be the first book a pastor chooses as the basis for a marriage study. It is, however, an excellent book for young couples simply looking for advice on what a godly marriage looks like. It could be used as a tool that can be put into the hands of young church members for the sake of calling them to a realistic approach to their current or future marriage.

*The Marriage Builder* by Larry Crabb<sup>23</sup>

Christian psychologist and counselor Larry Crabb writes about the need for God to be at the center of marriage. He uses Scripture to discuss the ways in which couples ought to interact with one another. He also employs the use of his psychological and counseling background to teach the skills necessary to work on baseline issues in marriage. His focus is on the needs of the individual in the couple and how those needs can be met. Crabb writes,

To understand God's design for marriage, we must begin with the fact that both husbands and wives have legitimate personal needs that press for satisfaction. These *personal* needs are as real as our *physical* needs. It is impossible to function effectively if these needs are not met. No marriage can ever follow the biblical pattern unless both partners know that at the deepest level, their personal needs have already been met. These needs can be met only in the context of a relationship with someone else; no person can satisfy his or her own needs.<sup>24</sup>

Without establishing the fact that each individual's needs are fulfilled first and fully in Christ, a husband and wife will always search to have their needs met by the other in an unrealistic way.

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23. Larry Crabb, *The Marriage Builder: Creating True Oneness to Transform Your Marriage* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2013).

24. Larry Crabb, *The Marriage Builder*, 34.

*The Marriage Builder* helps couples navigate the conversation in which couples seek to have their needs met by the each other in a realistic way.

Larry Crabb's ability to teach on the topic of marriage is evident in *The Marriage Builder*. He does a masterful job in breaking down marital difficulties and assessing the root causes of them. He explains his conclusions thoroughly and clearly, giving his readers exercises through which they can improve upon their relationships. His research and teaching methods are spot on and useful. However, Crabb's evangelical tendencies are seen in some of his theological thoughts. There are points at which he heavily emphasizes the individual's faith and ability in ways that Scripture does not.

*The Marriage Builder* is a book perfectly suited for pastors who want to work on their ability to teach marriage to their congregations. They can adapt the exercises to be used in group settings as well as learn new ways in which they can speak about communication techniques and conflict resolution.

*The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* by John Gottman<sup>25</sup>

John Gottman's seven principles are based on research into what makes a marriage happy. He writes:

No two marriages are the same, but the more closely my research team and I looked at happy marriages, the more evident it became that they were alike in seven telltale ways. Happily married couples may not be aware that they follow these seven principles, but they all do. Unhappy marriages always came up short in at least one of these seven areas— and usually in many of them.<sup>26</sup>

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25. John Mordechai Gottman and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, Second edition (New York: Harmony Books, 2015).

26. Gottman and Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, 21.

In examining the seven principles, a couple can evaluate their marriage and find areas in which growth would improve their marriage.

The strength of *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* is the “workbook” element. In each chapter, Gottman inserts a questionnaire and exercises to move from the theoretical to the practical. Couples get the opportunity to assess whether or not a certain principle is a strength or weakness of their marriage. The latter half of the book focuses on conflict resolution and gives couples the resources to understand what is impeding them from being able to solve their disagreements. This is a necessary part of the book as it serves as a “check-in” for couples who want to better understand the reason for their arguments.

Gottman’s book could be a helpful resource for congregations. Writing a Bible study based on the material may be difficult. Instead, this book might better serve a small group who wants to focus on the challenges and practical steps in couple communication. The target audience for *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* in a congregation would be experienced couples who have been married long enough to accurately and honestly utilize the workbook together. For Christians who have been married for a decade or two, Gottman’s book could serve as a breath of fresh air for their approach to their marriage.

*The Lies Couples Believe* by Chris Thurman<sup>27</sup>

*The Lies Couples Believe* takes a unique approach to marriage. It directly attacks the improper mindsets with which people, believers and unbelievers alike, approach marriage. Chris Thurman,

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27. Thurman, Chris. *The Lies Couples Believe: How Living the Truth Transforms Your Marriage*. First edition. Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2015.

a Christian psychologist, examines the improper expectations of couples that derail their relationships. Thurman writes,

Marriage is made or broken by many things, but the lies we believe about this most sacred of all relationships significantly contributes to marital disconnection and disharmony. When you have faulty beliefs about marriage, you will treat your spouse in hurtful and wounding ways. However, when you believe ‘whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable’ (Phil. 4:8) about marriage, you will treat your spouse in loving and kind ways.<sup>28</sup>

The lies discussed in the book are ones that govern the attitude with which husbands and wives approach their spouses. These lies are approached from a biblical perspective and are refuted with Scripture.

Thurman begins by asking his reader to fill out a questionnaire, attempting to determine how deeply held these lies are in a relationship. He then goes through the list of lies, explains what they are, and demonstrates how they hurt a relationship. The final pages of each chapter give the reader the opportunity to 1) acknowledge that they believe the lie, 2) assess the cost of believing the lie, 3) adopt a biblical truth about the lie, 4) act on the truth, and 5) ask for forgiveness for believing the lie. This section of each chapter allows the truth that the readers just learned to be applied directly to their marriage.

*The Lies Couples Believe* serves as a good resource for those who are looking to do maintenance on their marriage. While Thurman does not always consider a passage’s context, his book keeps the reader close to Scripture as they take on practical issues. This resource is structured in a way that makes it easily adaptable for a group to study. Ultimately, Thurman gives readers a tangible way of understanding how sin affects their mindset toward marriage as well as ways to combat it.

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28. Chris Thurman, *The Lies Couples Believe*, 14.



## Applying the Gospel

None of the six books listed were produced by WELS Lutherans. Many Christian resources leave something to be desired in their theology. The secular resources do not recognize a God-given purpose to marriage. Yet, in some way each of these books can be useful to a WELS pastor looking to make marriage enrichment a part of his ministry. By viewing both the secular activities and the Christian (often law-driven) encouragements through the lens of the gospel, these books can be used as guides in lives of marital service. Pastor Randy Hunter said, “We take what he’s [the secular author or researcher] learned from the science of human relationship and interaction and we ask ourselves: ‘Because of Jesus, what do I learn from that? How does that guide me as a redeemed child of God who wants to show my love for him and my spouse?’”<sup>29</sup>

There are certain tactics employed by secular and evangelical counselors that would be even more beneficial when utilized with a gospel motivation. The number of marriage books one could read is seemingly endless, some with more value than others. When creating marriage enrichment material, these books serve as a way of moving the conversation beyond the theoretical into the practical application of God’s Word.

## WELS Produced Books

There are WELS authors who have written on the subject of marriage. Pastor John Schneidervin wrote a practical book that uses Scripture to connect the Christian marriage to Christ. He writes, “All marriages have problems at times. The happy marriages are those which work through their problems and succeed in spite of them. The unhappy marriages are those which do not resolve

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29. Hunter interview.

their problems and flounder because of them.”<sup>30</sup> His book, *Deepening Love for Marital Happiness*, takes on couples’ problem-solving issues and links them to the Gospel.

Gene Gronholz and Pastor Mark Zarling wrote the book *Growing Together in Christ*. This book gives a couple a list of issues to lookout for as their marriage matures.<sup>31</sup> As a result, it finds itself published in a series called *Christians in Crisis*. *Growing Together in Christ* is unique in its ability to help couples examine the “cracks in the armor” before they become too large. Pastor John Schuetze’s book, *A Family Lives Because of Christ*, serves a biblical guide for premarital counseling. He uses Bible passages to reinforce the place of Scripture in every aspect of marriage. In his forward, Pastor Schuetze writes, “Many couples who don’t know Christ may keep their marriages together. They may even make them a seemingly happy arrangement. Yet their marriages aren’t alive. Without Christ a family isn’t living just as without Christ an individual is dead while living.”<sup>32</sup> The emphasis on Christ in every aspect of married life helps hammer home the central role that he ought to take place in every marriage.

These books do a beautiful job addressing the Christian couple. However, *Deepening Love for Marital Happiness*, *Growing Together in Christ*, and *A Family Lives Because of Christ* were written in 1992, 1996, and 1985 respectively. This is not to say that these books lack the timeless truths that God has spoken to his people. On the contrary, they serve as Lutheran guides to approaching marriage. While books on God’s principles for marriage never go out of date, it is important to note that each generation of marriages has issues unique to its time period. Satan’s

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30. John C. Schneidervin, *Deepening Love for Marital Happiness* (Milwaukee, Wis: Northwestern Pub. House, 1992), 63.

31. Gene Gronholz and Mark Zarling, *Growing Together in Christ: Marriage, Christians in Crisis* (Milwaukee, Wis: Northwestern Pub. House, 1996).

32. John D Schuetze, *A Family Lives Because of Christ: A Premarital Counseling and Marriage Enrichment Manual* (Milwaukee, Wis.: Northwestern Pub. House, 1985), vii.

assaults on marriage are timeless but they take on innovative forms in line with culture and context. These authors address contemporary couples with the present cultural context of marriage in mind and provide a godly means of defense against the devil's attacks.

### **Other Resources**

The sources being discussed in the next section are tools that the twelve pastors interviewed for this paper are using. While this is not the total sum of the marriage enrichment content being used by the interviewed pastors or pastors throughout the synod, these were the resources that received the most attention in the interviews.

### **Marriage Retreats**

WELS marriage retreats have been one way in which the synod has provided a setting for districts<sup>33</sup> to put an emphasis on marriage enrichment.<sup>34</sup> These regional marriage retreats attempted to give members in each district an opportunity to attend biennially. Pastor Boehm saw the blessing of having a full weekend away saying, "People got used to it and it was always nice. A great excuse to get away with your wife and give attention to marriage."<sup>35</sup> The primary focus of these weekends was for couples to be able to "check-in" on their marriages together, without distraction. These retreats came at a reasonable cost to those attending.<sup>36</sup> One of the key

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33. The WELS is divided into twelve districts. Each of these districts is supervised by a president and serves to carry out the work of God's Kingdom in a specific geographical location. This system allows churches to pool their resources to do ministry.

34. This paper was written on the heels of the emergence of Covid-19. As of its writing, there are no set future retreats.

35. Boehm interview.

36. Prices were dependent upon location and accommodations. While the cost was never exorbitant, several interviewees did point that families with less disposable income may second guess their ability to attend.

benefits to these retreats is the ability for the synod to maximize the use of well-trained presenters. In this way, the synod could put forth a strong product to participating couples throughout the country.

Pastor Donn Dobberstein spoke about the synodical plans for “marriage enrichment events.” The intent is that these events take place in targeted areas in which a high concentration of WELS members reside. About ten facilitators would be strategically located throughout the highly concentrated areas in order to spread out the work. These pastors would be equipped by the synod to continue to host these events in their region.<sup>37</sup> This is the proposed strategy to work with more couples across the synod.<sup>38</sup>

#### WELS Videos

In order to give access to marriage enrichment materials to more people, WELS Congregational Services<sup>39</sup> is developing online videos that address marriages. There are two stages of the project that are being produced at the time of the writing of this paper. Those two are “Marriage Moments” and “Marriage Maintenance.” Congregational Services is planning to produce two other concepts: “Marriage Mends” and “Marriage Miracles.” “Marriage Moments” is unique in its ability to address one concept as it relates to relationships and Scripture within three minutes. At the end of each video, couples are given a prompt which provides a discussion starter about

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37. Donn Dobberstein, interviewed by author, Zoom, October 25, 2021.

38. As of the writing of this paper, this plan is in development at the synodical level. This is the planed next step in the field of marriage enrichment “retreats.”

39. WELS Congregational Services is a branch of the synod’s administration that exists to equip pastors and congregations with evangelism and teaching resources that would be difficult for each individual church to create. Their work can be found on their website: <https://welscongregationalservices.net>.

the video. “Marriage Moments” is designed to give “bite sized chunks”<sup>40</sup> to those who are just beginning to dip their toe in the water when it comes to thinking about their marriage.

“Marriage Maintenance” is the second level of videos being produced by Congregational Services. These videos are meant for couples and groups to dive deeper into marital topics.

Pastor Jeremy Mattek has worked to create ten-minute videos that address a specific marriage issue. Pastor Mattek spoke about the accessibility of the videos saying:

A lot of the resources being developed by the synod... they’re hopefully being designed to be used in any number of contexts. You don’t need to be an experienced marriage counselor or even a pastor to be able to use these things... There’s a video introduction, but then it takes you through a worksheet, some way of applying what the biblical truth was that was shared in the video in a real practical way. Then a closing devotion that is already written. And there’s the teacher’s guide that comes along with it. It can be used by pastors, it can be used by a small group leader, it can be used by a couple in their own home. It’s designed to be very easily transferrable to any type of setting. So, you can be married and teaching it and you can be single and teaching it and for the most part the content is going to be the same.<sup>41</sup>

In this way, the WELS is attempting to put resources in the hands of pastors as well as members giving them the flexibility to work the video into Bible classes and homes.

Pastor Donn Dobberstein suggests two more possibilities for marriage tools: “Marriage Mends” and “Marriage Miracles.” “Marriage Mends” are videos that couples who are going through difficult, marriage-rattling issues. Pastor Dobberstein remarks,

“‘Marriage Mends’ are there for when the marriage gets torn and there’s a problem... this is more than a band aid. This is going to take some time and greater depth to be able to mend it... this could be a website where a wife goes to the website and she looks up the article that says ‘my spouse is watching porn.’ She clicks on the link and she gets solid biblical and practical guidance as to help her with it.”<sup>42</sup>

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40. Kock interview.

41. Jeremy Mattek, interviewed by author, Zoom, November 23, 2021.

42. Dobberstein interview.

Certainly, this is not meant to be a substitute for pastoral intervention. Instead, the aim of these videos would be to help couples take that first step that might be uncomfortable or embarrassing.

The fourth concept for WELS videos is “Marriage Miracles.” These are testimonial pieces that allow Christians to see God’s loving grace in the lives of their brothers and sisters. These videos would feature a couple who has gone through challenges in their marriage and have successfully come out on the other side. These videos are meant more for motivation than education.

### Prepare/Enrich

David and Karen Olson created Prepare/Enrich<sup>43</sup> in 1980 and have consistently updated it over the years. The goal of Prepare/Enrich is to give couples an objective means by which they can evaluate their marriage. It is an online program used for premarital counseling as well as marriage enrichment. Couples take an online test individually that provides data which creates a report for both the administrator as well as the couple. This gives them insight into conflict resolution, stressors, family dynamics, financial management, etc. Each category is listed as a relationship strength, possible relationship strength, possible growth area, or growth area. A facilitator discusses these categories with the couple. This allows the couple to learn about their marriage without argument or creating facades. It also brings the focus of the discussion onto the aspects of the relationship that need attention. Facilitators are trained to be able to work through the material with couples. They pay to become a facilitator and couples pay to use the program.<sup>44</sup>

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43. Further information about Prepare/Enrich can be found at <https://www.prepare-enrich.com>.

44. The online assessment is \$35 for a couple. The cost of the training to become a facilitator is \$250. Both costs are reasonable if a church desires to use this program in their marriage enrichment.

Prepare/Enrich provides a workbook for the couples and some exercises that can be done to understand differences and develop coping skills.<sup>45</sup>

Prepare/Enrich has a unique way of giving a pastor insight into a marriage that otherwise, may not be granted. Couples who think they are on the same page may notice a list of issues that often go unaddressed or unresolved.<sup>46</sup> Using the Checkup tool, couples can continue to navigate their differences throughout their marriage. Prepare/Enrich helps a pastor learn whether or not a couple needs counseling, serves as a guide for small group study, and helps ask the question: “How can Jesus address my marriage specifically?”

### CrossTrain

CrossTrain<sup>47</sup> is a program that specifically helps WELS pastors be intentional about growth in ministry and life. One of the aspects of this training is in the realm of marriage. CrossTrain provides coaching as couples create action plans and goals for their marriage. Rick Loewen serves as the director of CrossTrain Ministries and summarizes the strength of the program:

Every year people make New Year’s Eve resolutions with all the best intentions and ninety-five percent of them fail because they’re a wish and not a true goal. So, what we do is try to have a goal that is Christ-centered and that have encouragement and accountability and a written plan in place. And with that in mind, we found couples do really well. If we just leave it to “Hey, I know we should work on it more.” Not so much.

CrossTrain produces an interesting paradigm for marriage enrichment as it stresses accountability in its program. It accomplishes its goal with an annual retreat, personal coaching, marriage coaching, and ongoing marriage enrichment through webinars, book reading, & regular

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45. Information gathered from Pastor Peter Leyrer and <https://www.prepare-enrich.com>.

46. Dolan interview.

47. Further information about CrossTrain can be found at <https://crosstrainministries.com>.

communication.<sup>48</sup> By keeping couples connected to one another, CrossTrain is able to help Christians strengthen Christians. While CrossTrain is a program for WELS pastors, there are certain aspects of its accountability plan and coaching that can be harnessed and used at the congregational level.

### Grace for Marriage

Grace for Marriage<sup>49</sup> is an online resource center created by Pastor Randy Hunter that presents couples and congregations with material to help them dive into the meaning of their marriage. These videos provide couples with practical steps to encourage intentional work on their marriage. The website gives the couples the flexibility to move at the pace of their choosing through the topics. These sessions range from fifty-five to ninety minutes, diving deep into topics and giving couples tasks to carry out with one another. Each course comes with a workbook for husbands and wives to complete in order to keep them on task. Testimonials from other couples who have experienced challenges provide further motivation for Christians.

Perhaps the greatest strength of Grace for Marriage is its ability to be a consistent part of a relationship over the course of a year. By working on the material over time, a couple is more easily able to learn the skills and mindsets that Pastor Hunter teaches.

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48. Information gathered from <https://crosstrainministries.com/marriage-coaching/>.

49. Further information about Grace for Marriage can be found at <https://graceformarriage.com>.



## CURRENT APPROACHES TO MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT

This section of the paper is devoted to examining the ways in which pastors in the WELS carry out marriage enrichment in their congregations. While this is not an exhaustive list of churches who are taking on a marriage ministry, these are men who have taken unique approaches to bringing the gospel into the relationships within their congregations.<sup>50</sup>

### **Methodology**

In order to gain an understanding of the range of approaches to marriage enrichment, I surveyed eight pastors who currently serve in the parish. Each parish pastor was asked baseline questions about his experience with marriage enrichment.<sup>51</sup> Follow-up questions were asked as they pertained to particular aspects of his marriage ministry. The pastors were chosen because they were suggested by Professor David Bivens or one of the other pastors surveyed.<sup>52</sup> Four men who do not serve in the parish ministry were surveyed for this paper in order to better understand marriage enrichment from a synodical and educational perspective.

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50. This paper will not discuss every enrichment program in each congregation. It will only discuss those that are unique from others in this paper.

51. List of questions can be found in appendix 1.

52. Pastors were asked to name men that had an active marriage enrichment ministry.

### **Pastor Randy Hunter**

Pastor Randy Hunter serves at St. Andrew's in Middleton, Wisconsin. He is known to have made marriage a significant part of his ministry for decades. He has served as "the marriage guru"<sup>53</sup> for the WELS. Pastor Hunter is experienced in talking about marriage with couples across the synod at marriage retreats.

The driver of St. Andrew's ministry is growth groups. Many of the groups are focused on things other than marriage. However, a few groups take on marriage enrichment directly. They use materials provided by Pastor Hunter to biblically study marriage and discuss practical issues that come up in daily married life. Couples enter these particular growth groups with the understanding that marriage is the topic. In these small groups, brothers and sisters have the opportunity to share issues and ideas in a non-threatening environment.

Pastor Hunter also advocates for marriage retreats. These retreats have the unique ability to allow couples to press the reset button. Pastor Hunter sees marriage retreats as the place in which couples are able to take time for themselves and seriously reflect on their behavior and attitude in marriage.

St. Andrew's also uses a premarital program to strengthen their new marriages as well as for their outreach. Two Saturdays a year are designated as premarital workshop days. In the morning, the premarital couples listen to a presentation on marriage. After, they break for a catered lunch. At lunch and in the afternoon, they are paired up with an experienced couple from the church with whom they can discuss the material and ask questions. Pastor Hunter suggested that an ideal situation would allow the engaged or dating couple to meet up with the veteran couple once a month for a year to check in and take on a new marriage topic. In this way it could

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53. Dobberstein interview.

serve as an informal mentoring program.<sup>54</sup> By giving guidance at the beginning of marriage and providing them with opportunities to examine their marriage in growth groups and retreats, Pastor Hunter believes that these resources can equip Christians well for service in their lives.<sup>55</sup>

### **Pastor Ben Blumer**

Pastor Ben Blumer serves at NorthCross in Lakeville, Minnesota. He takes on marriage enrichment with quarterly “marriage nights.” These “marriage nights” are designed so that couples can listen to a speaker discuss a topic for around an hour and then go out on a date afterward. This setup serves several purposes. First and foremost, it connects the couple to a Scriptural thought about their marriage. Second, it gets them out of the house and on a date so that they can be intentional about relationship building. Third, it gives them a reason and atmosphere in which they can quickly put what they learned into practice and discuss it as a couple. This moves marriage enrichment from a theoretical to a practical place.

An enhancement that Pastor Blumer proposes is adding a check-in component. He believes that it is possible to take the accountability stressed by CrossTrain ministries and put it into practice at the congregational level. Couples would have the option of monthly check-ins between quarterly “marriage nights.” He would pair up couples, teach them the principle, and explain the desired action or habit in which they can grow. The couple would then check-in with their peer couple to talk about their progress.<sup>56</sup>

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54. The mentoring aspect of the program is not mandated, but is strongly encouraged.

55. Hunter interview.

56. Ben Blumer, interviewed by author, Zoom, November 11, 2021.

### **Pastor Donald Patterson**

Pastor Donald Patterson serves as the pastor at Holy Word Lutheran Church in Austin, Texas. His approach to marriage enrichment centers on small groups. Small groups went on informal retreats and were encouraged to bring another couple the following month. This setup lasted for two years until it was replaced by their current model. Currently, Holy Word has a connect group led by their staff minister. This group meets monthly at a different home for a meal and topic discussion. Regular attendance is mandatory for those in the group. This helps members hold each other accountable.<sup>57</sup>

### **Pastor Jeremy Mattek and Timothy Dolan**

Pastors Jeremy Mattek and Timothy Dolan serve at Immanuel in Greenville, Wisconsin. They try to work on marriage early and often through small groups. They place resources in the hands of their congregation to study, discuss in groups, and apply to their lives. These small groups give the pastors flexibility and remove the marriage program from resting entirely on their shoulders. They can give members pre-packaged materials and allow them to explore marriage on their own.

Pastor Mattek and Pastor Dolan also suggested a check-in system. At predetermined intervals (six months, two years, and five years), couples would be encouraged to sit down with a pastor to discuss what is going well and what is most challenging in their marriage. This would give the couple room to discuss issues outside of “crisis counseling.” Pastor Mattek explains the reasoning saying,

Let’s stay in touch with every couple in those early years to be really proactive in staying engaged with them: initiating conversations about marriage, presenting easy opportunities

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57. Don Patterson, interviewed by author, Zoom, November 10, 2021.

for them to talk about what's going well, what's not going well. And hopefully by doing that a lot of things that would have come up down the road come up earlier in a more comfortable setting and not as serious. Where it hasn't blow up yet and we can start to address some of those things.<sup>58</sup>

This is less about creating a "program" in a congregation and more about being intentional in conversation. Pastors Mattek and Dolan are fostering an atmosphere in which marriage is discussed as a normal topic. The goal is to get their congregation "thinking marriage."<sup>59</sup>

### **Pastor Nathan Buege**

Pastor Buege serves at Victory of the Lamb in Katy, Texas. He is the sole pastor at his congregation of around two hundred members. While he utilizes annual WELS marriage retreats when possible, the main marriage enrichment tools that he uses are Bible class and Sunday sermons. He says, "I don't think we have a system in place really... I try to work in marriage application regularly to the several different Bible studies that we have. And that's the heartbeat of our congregation. We have the Sunday Bible study and four other ones during the week and so I try to have marriage enrichment questions and thoughts coming up regularly in those."<sup>60</sup> Pastor Buege's goal it to weave marriage into the fabric of his congregation. He does so, recognizing the dangers of excluding single people saying,

I also think it's really good for single people to hear Christian marriage applications. And I try to regularly talk to single people about how they can honor God's gift of marriage right now. You can really help out your future marriage if God blesses you with that if you're not addicted to porn. If you're not in a miserable, wild financial condition. If you're not addicted to alcohol or drugs. If you're not a hot mess of a human being, you can really help out your marriage.<sup>61</sup>

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58. Mattek interview.

59. Mattek interview.

60. Nathan Buege, interviewed by author, Phone Call, October 28, 2021.

61. Buege interview.

By including single people in his talk about marriage, he makes certain that they will not feel excluded. Pastor Buege sees the work of marriage enrichment as a ministry that will strengthen the congregation at large.

### **Pastor Aaron Boehm**

Pastor Aaron Boehm serves at Shepherd of the Hills in La Mesa, California. He created a program called the “Marriage Collective.” All of the churches in the circuit are invited to participate in this group. At the beginning of the yearly cycle, there is an enrollment period. At the end of the enrollment period, the group closes. The couples join a private Facebook group in which they can communicate, and Pastor Boehm can leave articles and content. Each quarter of the year focuses on a different aspect of marriage (communication, friendship, etc.). The group meets once a quarter with pairs of couples meeting up in the months between. Pastor Boehm coordinates the discussion questions in between meetings. The emphasis of the group is to build one another up in their marriages.

Pastor Boehm explains his logic behind this group approach to marriage enrichment saying:

Rather than saying, “Here’s fifteen things that you can use and it’s great you’ve got so much stuff.” Because my experience is that nobody does anything with fifteen things, but if you pick one or two things that are really good and say, ‘Do this if you do nothing else and here’s the plan for how to keep doing it and here’s the people that are going to do it along with you,’ there’s a much higher success rate.<sup>62</sup>

By using this format for marriage enrichment, Pastor Boehm is able to maintain flexibility. He can decide what type of material the members ought to go through, and he can suggest activities

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62. Boehm interview.

throughout the entirety of the year. The connections made between the couples and the group hold the members accountable to continue working on their marriage.

### **Pastor Peter Leyrer**

Pastor Peter Leyrer serves at Risen Savior in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He has used Prepare/Enrich in his ministry for sixteen years. He spoke to the pastor's ability to use it saying, "It is designed for people who don't have a background in psychology."<sup>63</sup> Pastor Leyrer has used Prepare/Enrich for one on one premarital counseling and marriage enrichment as well as for small group work.

I have done a couple of marriage retreats based on the material that's in Prepare/Enrich. To get into the group program, your church has to enroll in it through Prepare/Enrich and then they give you a bunch of materials that are suitable for something like this. Then you also get a different report on your couple which is called a 'group report.' The report that you get back on that is similar to the couple's report... and it's tailored toward that group setting.<sup>64</sup>

This enables the facilitator to use these analytical tools in many ways that suit their ministry and understand what they would like to accomplish in the field of marriage.

Any couple in the congregation can ask to go through this program. They take the test individually and then meet with Pastor Leyrer to discuss the results. He walks them through all of their strengths and growth areas in the first session. In the following sessions, he applies biblical truths to the skill building workbook to help the couple grow in their weaker areas. This tool also helps Pastor Leyrer determine whether or not it is necessary for a licensed marriage counselor to intervene. This program helps couples see unrecognized issues and gives the pastor the tools to assist in their growth.

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63. Peter Leyrer, interviewed by author, November 5, 2021.

64. Leyrer interview.

## POSSIBILITIES FOR ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS

### **Understanding Unique Contexts**

Every congregation is blessed with unique talents, resources, and ministry opportunities. Pastors have the blessing of finding out what types of ministry work in the context in which they serve. There are certain factors that will dictate a pastor's ability to carry out marriage enrichment by the means and to the extent which he desires.

The number of pastors on staff impacts the church's ability to establish a marriage enrichment program. Pastor Mattek speaks to a potential difficulty saying, "If you're in a congregation with four-hundred fifty people and you're the only pastor, you're probably not going to have as much time to do all the check-ins and the Bible studies and the different things like that."<sup>65</sup> Pastors in these types of settings may look at their schedule, see sixty hours of ministry already slated, and have no time to put in the effort needed for marriage nights or satisfactory small group material. Congregations in which three or four pastors serve may be better equipped to put marriage enrichment under the umbrella of one man's ministry.

Interest levels in marriage enrichment vary depending on the congregation. Some congregations have little interest to directly pursue marriage in the church. Others may desire to discuss marriage principles as the Bible explains them, but nothing more. Some churches may have members that desire not only to discuss marriage principles, but also their application to marital issues. It is vital that the congregation show some type of desire for this type of ministry.

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65. Mattek interview.



A pastor would find himself in a frustrating place if he was trying to create a marriage program in a setting in which there is little interest.<sup>66</sup>

### **Options for Congregations**

The following are options for marriage enrichment programs. These ideas were either gathered or adapted from the interviewees. With each of these concepts, there are positives and negatives. They are listed in order of perceived intensity and commitment beginning with those that require the most effort.

#### Mentoring

A mentoring program has the ability to bring members closer together and further unite the family of believers. It would require a great deal of initial work and guidance from a pastor to set a mentoring program up. Mentors and mentees would also be asked to make a large commitment. Pairing couples and encouraging them to walk together can be beneficial. Kevin Thompson writes, ““Every older couple is helped as they interact with younger couples. It will remind them of the importance of being role models, which will encourage them to make wise choices. Interacting with younger couples can also reinvigorate a seasoned marriage, reminding the older couple of the passion and excitement they might have once felt.”<sup>67</sup> A mentor program could begin at the premarital stage and continue into the early years of marriage.<sup>68</sup>

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66. Dr. Mark Paustian gives an encouragement to make sure a ministry is scratching the “itch” of the congregation rather than it scratching the “itch” of the pastor. Marriage enrichment “programs” ought to fit the desires and needs of the members.

67. Thompson, *Friends, Partners, and Lovers*, 83.

68. Hunter interview.

Besides the work and commitment required, a potential drawback to a mentor program is its inconsistency of experience.<sup>69</sup> Certain couples may make for solid mentors while others may not. Some congregations simply do not have the manpower to accomplish such a program. Churches may have men and women who are dedicated to their marriage, but they simply do not have the desire or the gifts to serve another couple. That being said, asking Christians to walk with one another can serve as loving accountability that is otherwise difficult to create.

### Circuit Marriage Collective

Pastor Aaron Boehm's "Marriage Collective" paints a picture in which all of the churches in one circuit or geographical area utilize the gifts of one man to address marriage. This would allow resources to be pooled and the strengths of one man to be utilized. Members of nearby congregations could grow together in their work on marriage. Quarterly circuit wide meetings with congregational meetings in between could allow for a consistent enrichment experience without taking up the time of multiple pastors. One issue that could arise with this concept could be a pastor's inability to carry out ministry to the degree that he desires in his own church. A second potential issue is a lack of communication between pastors. A system in which pastors could communicate about members' serious marital struggles would have to be in place so that their home pastor is kept up to date.

### Small Groups

Small groups or growth groups provide the perfect atmosphere for marriage enrichment. They give Christians that have similar goals and interests the opportunity to discuss marriage at an

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69. Mattek interview.

intimate level. A pastor could utilize synod videos and materials and allow the groups to see where the discussion takes them. In this scenario a strong small group leader is necessary.

Pastor Mattek spoke about some of the small groups in his congregation saying, “We do small groups ... and different groups gather around different life stages. And there are some that are married couples that want to focus specifically on marriage. So, we give them whatever resources we can find and give them some guidance along the way.”<sup>70</sup> Perhaps one of the most useful aspects of using growth groups for marriage enrichment is the connection that can be made between Christians in similar life situations. Young couples, couples with young kids, and empty nesters could be placed in individual groups. These husbands and wives would be able to better empathize with one another.

#### Prepare/Enrich

The Prepare/Enrich program aids pastors in the diagnostic process of marriage counseling. Becoming a facilitator could be well worth it for a pastor in a congregation that is interested in making marriage a priority. It would give pastors the ability to work with couples individually to apply Christ to any underlying marital issues. A pastor could also use Prepare/Enrich to guide a small group through an honest and open discussion about marriage. While the usage of this program will take up time in a pastor’s schedule, the value to being able to understand root issues in a couple quickly and clearly is immense. Such a program adds a level of objective formality to any enrichment effort because it has been created by experts but administered by the pastor or congregation.

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70. Mattek interview.

### Marriage Retreats

Marriage retreats are a wonderful way to get couples thinking about and devoting time to their marriages. They are unique in that they make use of a marriage expert that can speak well on the topic. Retreats provide the added bonus of getting husbands and wives away from their children to hit the pause button on life and check-in with one another. This, however, is a double-edged sword. Not every couple is able to make the time to leave their children at home for the weekend. There are also many couples who cannot afford to make the trip.<sup>71</sup> This narrows the scope for couples who will be reached by the program. However, if a church sees marriage retreats as playing a vital role in the life of their congregation, they could attempt to mitigate the circumstances that would prevent couples from attending. Allocating funds to assist with expenses and setting up child care could demonstrate the importance of this ministry. Retreats are a useful tool for churches who express interest in strengthening marriages. Enrichment weekends can help couples reconnect over God's Word.

### Premarital Counseling with Check-in Component

Premarital counseling is the first step toward strong marriages. A combination of Pastor Hunter's and Pastor Mattek's premarital plans could be vital in setting marriages on a proper course. A pastor could create a premarital workshop that takes place on two Saturdays a year, linking engaged and experienced couples. After marriage the pastor would schedule check-ins at the six-

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71. Several pastors who were interviewed expressed a gratitude for retreats but recognized some of the difficulties that accompany them. Childcare, travel expense, and paid

month, two-year, and five-year marks. The work of the pastor would coincide with scheduled check-ins with the assigned married couple.

Using a check-in component allows a couple and pastor to be proactive in their marriage work. Rather than waiting until a marriage is on the brink of falling apart to seek help, there are established periods that give members natural times to seek counsel and talk through problems. This is a key component to a marriage enrichment program that seeks to spend time counseling proactively rather than reactively.

This plan is robust in its approach to the first years of a married couple's life. However, it would come with a great deal of labor for the pastor. This would likely only work in contexts in which there are many pastors or few new marriages.

### Marriage Nights

One of the simplest ways to carry out marriage enrichment is monthly or quarterly marriage seminars. A pastor could create his own seminar series or use WELS videos and resources. Pastor Blumer and Patterson spoke about the usefulness of "date nights" in which couples get together, study one topic, and head out for individual dates to talk about the session. This could create a consistent emphasis on strengthening marriage while not burdening the pastor with an impossible load of preparation.

### Sermon Series

Some pastors lack the time to put together a marriage enrichment program. In settings in which a pastor's time is completely tied up in other aspects of ministry, there are options in which marriage enrichment can be taught implicitly. A sole pastor who shepherds a large congregation

can incorporate marriage enrichment into sermons. Pastor Timothy Dolan suggests that there is value in addressing the subject of marriage where it may be naturally found.

A short sermon series during Pentecost concerning Christian living could serve as a way to make marriage a priority in congregational life. Rather than forcing marriage into a place in which it does not belong, a pastor could take three weeks to address how couples (and Christians in general) behave towards one another and live lives of service. This is a small action that can be taken without throwing out the entire church year. One strength of a sermon series on marriage is its reach. Husbands and wives who may have no desire to go to a marriage enrichment seminar may learn about their relationship without realizing it.

### Bible Class

Sunday Bible class can serve as another touch point for pastors to bring the gospel into marriages. Pastor Buege points out that single people will not come to a Bible class entitled “Marriage Bible study.” They will, however, come to a general Bible class that has marriage as some of its application points.

Using marriage in Bible study can be useful when done well. If all of a pastor’s applications are marriage based, he may find himself alienating the single people in his congregation. Instead, he can simply be intentional about making sure that marital applications make their way into a class without becoming the central point. By doing so he will create an atmosphere in which talking about marriage becomes commonplace.

If a pastor is looking to teach a month-long Bible class with an emphasis on marriage, the synod produced videos would serve as strong discussion starters. Pastors would be able to adapt

the resource in any way they would like. Classes on these videos could serve as an introduction for members to begin using them on their own.

### Every Home a Church

Dr. Mark Paustian suggests a simple approach to marriage enrichment. He encourages congregations to take on Luther's ideal: every home a church. Through visits to every member in his congregation, a pastor can promote the idea that church is the second place for ministry, and home is the first. If a household is connected to their Savior at home, marriages will naturally become stronger. A pastor's position in this marriage enrichment "program" can simply be providing at-home material. While taking practical steps to strengthen the bond of marriage, there is simply no substitute for a husband and a wife hearing the voice of their Lord together. Supporting family devotion is not a new marriage strengthening concept, but it is effective.

### Model a Healthy Marriage

One pastor surveyed asked the question: "How is a pastor going to preach about marriage or talk about marriage openly (and) honestly in a way that's edifying and fruitful if his own marriage is dying on the vine?"<sup>72</sup> This is an honest question with which pastors have to wrestle. It is difficult for a pastor to speak about marriage frequently if his own marriage is on the brink of collapse. One of the best ways in which a pastor can help teach marriage is by modeling it. He need not model it in a way that looks like an unattainable fairytale. Instead, he can model it as it is: two sinners who freely give the forgiveness that their God gave to them.

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72. Dr. Mark Paustian, interviewed by author, Zoom, November 17, 2021.

Pastor Hunter and Blumer both spoke to the importance of pastors modeling marriage in a congregation. They stressed the fact that congregations see the way in which pastors and their wives interact with one another. It is a beautiful and edifying thing for congregations to see their pastor enjoying one another's company or going to Holy Communion together. Pastors have the opportunity to publicly support their wives and the way in which they serve in the church. As is the case with many things in ministry, a pastor must first apply the Word of God to his own life. Only afterward is he ready to share it with others. This is no different in marriage.

#### **Four Aspects of a Marriage Enrichment Program**

Assuming there is the impetus to initiate some form of program, four important aspects of marriage enrichment programs became clear after interviewing WELS pastors: Sustainability, consistency, accessibility, and accountability. These characteristics help make marriage enrichment a part of a congregation's life. A program does not need to possess all of these traits. They are simply aspects to keep in mind when deciding how to address marriage enrichment and are worthwhile concepts to consider when discussing potential marriage ministry plans with church leadership.

#### **Sustainability**

How long can the program continue? Some pastors take on marriage enrichment with a plan to end the program after a set amount of time (a month, a year). However, congregations may want to commit to making marriage discussions a long-term part of the church. If that is the case, a pastor has to consider what it is feasible for him to do over the course of time. If a congregation grows to love this aspect of their church, it would be difficult for it to disappear.



Financial support of marriage enrichment programs is one key to sustaining them. Marriage retreats, Saturday luncheons, and utilizing Prepare/Enrich all come at a cost. A congregation can either expect those participating in the program to fund it or it can set aside funds to subsidize this ministry. The financial situation of the congregation as well as the size of this ministry will certainly factor into that decision. However, if a congregation is able to prioritize subsidy for these programs in their budget, marriage enrichment may more easily be sustained year after year.

### Consistency

How frequently can the program be offered? Marriage retreats are likely to occur once or twice a year. Quarterly Bible studies demand more time from a pastor. Monthly small group meetings require material to be provided. When assessing the type of enrichment program that is right for a congregation, it is important to consider how often the congregation will want to participate and how much time the pastor has to make it a consistent part of his ministry schedule.

### Accessibility

Can a church utilize what is being provided? When determining what avenue to pursue, it is important to consider how accessible the resources will be. Retreats can be expensive and time consuming, limiting the number of participants. Small groups and consistent gathering will allow Christians to dive deeper into their marriages, but may cause some to hesitate to commit. Providing short Marriage Moment videos may give access to a wide range of members but may

not resonate as deeply as group work.<sup>73</sup> Each congregation will desire a certain level of accessibility to marriage resources.

### Accountability

Will members be encouraged to participate regularly? Pastors Boehm and Blumer encourage accountability as one of the most important traits of marriage enrichment. Pastor Blumer says, “Unless you have the specific skillset of focus and follow-through, nine times out of ten you get inspired at an enrichment, and that’s where it stays. It stays on a book on the shelf or a Word doc on your computer, and the follow through doesn’t happen.” While not all marriage enrichment programs will have an element of accountability outside of the couple itself, it can be tremendously beneficial to have a check-in system in place.

### Areas for Further Study

One area that deserves more consideration is the stimulation of additional WELS-produced resources that would be readily accessible to WELS congregations and pastors. The WELS could use more materials for congregation members that are gospel motivated. The talented Christians in the WELS have the ability to write marriage books from the perspective of a child of God who has been perfectly and fully served by Jesus.<sup>74</sup> This is not a perspective from which many

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73. Dobberstein interview.

74. Pastor Patterson spoke about the talent that lies within the synod. The synod has all the talent it needs to create these resources. It is difficult, however, to enable pastors to devote such extensive time to this work while they have many other things going on in the congregations they serve.

marriage authors write. God's people would be richly served by more Confessional Lutheran marriage books. Another area that requires further study is the idea of using marriage enrichment as an outreach tool. Can this be a church's inroad into the community? Is there a circumstance in which premarital counseling or marriage enrichment can serve specific types of regions and cultures?

## CONCLUSION

In a world in which marriage is losing not only its meaning but its value, churches have the opportunity to prove the value and beauty of marriage. Marriage serves as a beautiful picture of Christ and his people. This picture is reflected in our society, our churches, and our homes. God's word lays down principles for how Christians husbands and wives ought to behave toward one another and it is a truly beautiful thing when they treat one another with the love of Christ.

The WELS pastors who were interviewed for this paper have spent their ministries experimenting with ways - both traditional and innovative - to proactively foster healthy marriages. They have been trying new tactics to keep godly marriage on the minds of their people. I pray that over the next decades, pastors continue to prioritize marriage enrichment. There are countless areas of ministry that can occupy a pastor's time and using the God's word to strengthen couples is an important one. The resources and programs provided by the interviewees can provide the first step in making marriage a priority in a church.

Marriage ministry does not need to be the only thing a church does. It need not even be a primary ministry. Yet, it ought to have some presence in the church because it is the closest partnership that God has given to his creation as they walk toward heaven. God's institution of marriage is a battleground for sinner-saints, a place in which Paul's description of the Christian life in Romans 7 is on full display. The husband desires to do what is good, but he can not carry it out. The wife knows the evil that she does not want to do, but this she keeps on doing. The

struggle does not end on this side of heaven, but in the grace of Jesus couples can grow.

Patience, service, and forgiveness do not come naturally to fallen human beings. It is for this reason that marriage enrichment exists: to apply Christ's love to daily life. A husband has the deep pleasure of selflessly serving his wife. A wife can serve as the mouthpiece of God as she announces her husband's forgiveness. Couples learn patience, service, and forgiveness at the foot of the cross. By God's grace and with his Word, marriage enrichment has the ability to bring them to that place over and over again. To him be the glory!

## APPENDIX: QUESTIONS FOR THE INTERVIEWEES

This is the list of questions from which the author operated when conducting his interviews. Not all of the questions were asked of each individual and some were asked in addition to this list.

1. In your estimation, what percentage of your pastoral work as it relates directly to marriage is done proactively versus reactively?
2. Does your congregation have a marriage enrichment program? If so, what resources/books do you use? (Are they working? Could the program be expanded?)
3. Does the synod equip pastors with enrichment resources?
4. In your experience with marriage enrichment, what works best (individual couples, small group, large Bible study)?
5. What topics do you find most helpful to cover in an enrichment program?
6. What do you do for premarital counseling? Does it have “check-in” components?
7. Do you use any secular resources in working on marriage in your church?
8. In your opinion, what is the greatest impediment between marriage enrichment plans and their being carried out?
9. Do you have time to carry out the task of marriage enrichment to the degree that you desire?
10. Do you know of any pastor in our synod that is doing especially good work in this field?

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