

ASHLAND THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IMPACTING MARITAL HEALTH IN THE LOCAL CHURCH CONTEXT  
THROUGH THE PREPARE-ENRICH GROUP PROGRAM

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF ASHLAND THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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To Theresa

A woman's beauty lights up a man's face,  
and there is nothing he desires more.

If kindness and humility mark her speech,  
her husband is more fortunate than other men.

He who acquires a wife gets his best possession,  
a helper fit for him and a pillar of support.

Where there is no fence, the property will be plundered;  
and where there is no wife, a man will become a fugitive and a wanderer.

Sirach 36:27-30

APPROVAL PAGE

Accepted by the faculty and the final demonstration examining committee of Ashland Theological Seminary, Ashland, Ohio, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Ministry degree.

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project was to impact the relationship health of participating married couples at Orange Friends Church through the Prepare-Enrich Group Program. The Prepare-Enrich Group Program was implemented over a six week course and effectiveness of the purpose was measured using participant assessments that were administered previous to the program start and after the course was complete.

The program clearly impacted the participating couples, primarily in the areas of self-awareness, conflict resolution, and increased satisfaction. Application for the local church and recommendation for further research is offered for consideration.

## CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ix
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION AND FOUNDATIONS.....	1
2. BIBLICAL, HISTORICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS.....	31
3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	66
4. DESIGN, PROCEDURE AND ASSESSMENT.....	104
5. REPORTING THE RESULTS.....	115
6. SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS.....	128
Appendix	
1. PROJECT PROPOSAL.....	148
2. PROJECT ASSESSMENT.....	183
REFERENCES.....	189

## TABLES

Table	Page
5.1. Participant Status Awareness.....	117
5.2. Conflict Resolution Skills.....	118
5.3. Participant Increased Satisfaction.....	120
5.4. Participant Individual Contribution .....	121
5.5. Communication Skills.....	123
5.6. Participants Feeling Better Equipped.....	125

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTIONS AND FOUNDATIONS

Church is a lifesaving station. Church is a center for triage. Church is the place for the incomplete, broken, and dying to find wholeness, healing, and life. Many marriages in our midst are in need of what the church has to offer in Christ Jesus. Marriages are often incomplete, broken, and dying. Yet, for various reasons, individual churches often struggle in their role as the medium that brings marital health and vitality. What follows is the result of a research project which was conducted in the context of the local church with the intent of being a medium of health and vitality in marriages.

#### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this project was to impact the relationship health of participating married couples at Orange Friends Church through the Prepare-Enrich Group Program. The research question was: To what extent did the Prepare-Enrich Group Program impact the relationship health of select married couples at Orange Friends Church? The challenge for many churches is to discover the best way to maximize limited resources while making the greatest impact possible. This participatory action research project sought to make notable changes in the relationships of those couples who engaged in the Prepare-Enrich Group Program.

## **Overview**

The focus of this project was to impact the relationship health of participating couples at Orange Friends Church through the Prepare-Enrich Group Program. Specifically, this project assisted couples in discovering the health status of their relationship and developing a healthy path forward. Couples took the Prepare-Enrich online assessment prior to participating in the program. The Prepare-Enrich assessment tool gave couples a clear understanding of strength and growth areas, stressors, personality preferences, and couple and family issues. As the assessment results were delivered in a group format, rather than individually, the couples discovered the overall status of their relationship health, increased in practical communication, conflict resolution skills, and in the level of satisfaction in their relationship.

This project sought to impact select couples through implementation of the Prepare-Enrich Group Program. Session curriculum provided a framework for the results of the Prepare-Enrich couple assessment. The Prepare-Enrich Group Program included six sessions over six weeks. Sessions included facilitator instruction, group interaction, and one-on-one couple discussion. I assessed the impact on the relationship health of the couples that participated through a pre-test and post-test of closed and open-ended questions on an agreement scale. In addition, individuals were asked to respond to six qualitative questions to further evaluate the level of impact. Questions were based on the project goals.

## **Foundations**

Relational health and vibrancy is one of the pillars of transformation in Christ Jesus. I have experienced this in my own life and have seen this as a critical truth in my vocational path within the church. Relational health is also foundational to our faith and practice. This is not only true in our working relationships and friendships, but is especially true for our familial connections. Marriage health and vitality is at the center of the family unit. The level of health in this relationship impacts every other relationship.

I have found in my journey with Christ that my relationships have been transformed as a result of spiritual formation. This is where the personal foundations for this project begin. In 1989, I took my first ministry position working with teenagers. For the next sixteen years, I worked in teen ministry. Over that time period, I was continually confronted with the fact that the teenagers within my ministry were impacted by the kind of marriage their parents had.

Eventually, I ended up working directly with marriages through an organization in Springfield, Ohio called The Marriage Resource Center- Miami Valley. I began to experience and see the impact on relationship health through proactive intervention with couples at all stages of development. My wife and I were trained in relationship education and marriage enrichment systems and tools. We then began to teach and train couples and other marriage ministry leaders in this material. We saw a positive difference with couples as we taught them new skills and coached them towards relational health and vibrancy.

While the organization's primary relationship education curriculum was called RINGS, the primary assessment and mentoring/coaching tool was Prepare-Enrich. During my tenure with the Marriage Resource Center- Miami Valley, I became a certified facilitator and seminar director for the Prepare-Enrich material. I have continued to train pastors, counselors, and relationship professionals in the material since being certified to do so in 2006. I use Prepare-Enrich with every couple that comes to me for pastoral counseling. I have found Prepare-Enrich to be effective in helping couples move towards greater relational health. It is also beneficial for facilitators, who are given a clearer understanding of the couples they are working with and the path to guide them on towards greater health.

The Prepare-Enrich program has primarily been facilitated with individual couples. In 2012, the organization launched a new group-based format. Since I have been effectively training professionals and successfully using the material with individual couples, I was interested in the opportunity to have a wider impact by taking several couples simultaneously through the program.

My personal foundations include experience and training in marriage ministry, but my strongest foundation lies in the belief that Jesus Christ transforms individuals and relationships. We have a relational God. We have been called to a relational church. Each of us is given families with whom to relate. In the midst of these relationships, God provides redemption, restoration, healing, joy, fruit, and prosperity. Therefore, the church has, as its privilege, the ministry of relational healing for marriages.

## Biblical Foundation

The New Mandate, as it is called, found in John 13:34-35, is a call to love one another as Christ has loved us. This command is best understood as a call to a covenant, to mutually beneficial reciprocal relationships, and to follow the example of Christ. It is my conclusion that when a specific marriage reflects on and applies this understanding, better relational health results.

The command to love one another is set in the Gospel according to John. Chapters 13-17 make up what is known as the Farewell Discourse that was delivered by Jesus in the Upper Room on the night He was arrested. The discourse begins with an introduction of vv.31-38 (Brown 1970, 596-97). Previous to this, Jesus had washed the disciples' feet and challenged them to also wash one another's feet. He spoke of His betrayer and revealed Judas to be this person. Upon being exposed, Judas made a quick exit. Jesus then shared with the remaining disciples about His glorification and their impending life without his physical presence. Jesus then shared the central message of His extended remarks: love one another as I have loved you. This message is clarified by Christ as an indication or evidence of discipleship (Moloney 2005, 11-13). The New Commandment was shared by Christ in an environment that was emotionally confusing and extremely difficult for the disciples. This command provided relational clarity in the midst of discomfort and conflict.

Therefore, it is safe to say that the new command to love one another was given in the midst of disciples who were experiencing fear, doubt, struggle and relational uncertainty. In addition to this, the self-interest of the disciples was

competing with their Lord's command to love one another. This band of disciples was dealing with conflict at many levels; in many ways at this moment.

Therefore, the passage not only takes on a declarative posture, but we can also read a message of comfort (Parsenius 2002, 218, 221, 231).

### *Redemptive Relationships*

As we have seen, we are commanded to love one another in the midst of conflict and crisis and in the face of our own self-interest. This is the context of the New Mandate, and it is the context for marriages. Conflict, crisis, disappointment, self-interest, and ignorance are areas of unhealthy existence that can be touched by the redeeming nature of the new command. This is biblically infused transformation for the living of redemptive relationships.

Redemptive relationships, which are relationships that are transformed through the New Mandate, turn up throughout scripture. Specifically, the gospel of John carries the motif of love infusing and resulting from redemptive relationships. For example, Mary washed Jesus' feet with perfume, which gave the disciples a glimpse of the love He was asking them to exhibit and embody (John 12). This type of love was revolutionary in the context of the world in which Jesus lived (Belsterling 2006, 82). It was revolutionary due to its parallels with a covenantal relationship, its reciprocal nature (giving and receiving love), and the fixture of Jesus as the primary model (Chennattu 2006, 97).

## *The Covenant Relationship*

Rekha M. Chennattu wrote at length in *Johannine Discipleship as a Covenant Relationship* on the nature of the new covenant within the Gospel of John and, more specifically, with the New Mandate. "There is no better metaphor than the OT covenant relationship to describe this love and communion that should exist among the disciples, between the disciples and Jesus, and between Jesus and the Father" (Chennattu 2006, 98). Earlier, we discussed the conciliatory nature that the Farewell Discourse has, and we can also say that it contains a covenant discourse as well. This is seen through a "covenant relationship [that] is implied by both the covenant command and the covenant sign: love for one another (13:34-35)" (Chennattu 2006, 83). This command implies covenant. Just as, in the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments were to be observed by Israel as a designation of being God's chosen people, this New Commandment is given whereby they will be known as the disciples of Christ (Brown 1970, 612).

God's record of making covenant with humankind is well documented in scripture. Therefore, the New Mandate carries with it a covenantal relationship that binds us to God and to one another. As Chennattu states, "The biblical metaphor of covenant ... signifies and implies a binding relationship based on commitment" (Chennattu 2006, 50-51). A Christian marriage is a covenant relationship. The nature of a covenant conveys a much stronger message and commitment than the average contract or agreement. We would do well to educate and inform couples of this as clearly as possible when they enter into

this agreement with one another and with God. The act of obedience by loving one another in a covenantal way builds up the relationship between the disciple and God (Parsenius 2002, 226):

The best way of expressing our love for God and keeping his commandments is by loving fellow humans. It is in this context that we understand the command "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18). Sharing life with one's covenant partner is very essential to a covenant relationship. The life that the individuals hold is not private property, but something common, which has to be shared with others. In brief, keeping the commandments, loving and sharing the life with others, are intrinsic to the nature of a covenant relationship. (Chennattu 2006, 65)

This New Mandate binds Christian couples through the peaks and valleys that a normal relationship endures.

#### *Mutually Edifying Reciprocal Relationships*

The understanding of love in the first century Mediterranean world was different than in contemporary America. To love one another in the way that Jesus has commanded requires a mutually edifying reciprocal relationship. It speaks of loyalty, value, and reliability fleshed out within the relationship (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998, 228). Reciprocal relationships seek to console, serve, care for and understand the needs of the other disciple. In so doing, each person involved in this redeemed relationship is standing in the stead of the love of Jesus, who is not physically present (Brown 1970, 614).

In the New Mandate, Jesus calls married couples to be aware of the needs and personality of their spouse so that they can intelligently love one another. Mutually beneficial reciprocal relationships express loyalty as a result of loving awareness.

### *The Example of Jesus*

Love is the central command in this passage, and this love is shown most clearly through the death and resurrection of Christ (Morris 1995, 560). Jesus has loved the disciples and shown them the full extent of his love (foot washing) and will love them through the cross. Therefore, they are to love one another (Morris 1995, 562). As we digest scripture, the example of Jesus to His disciples becomes our example as well. Raymond Brown says that John 13:34 could be rendered, "I have loved you in order that you also love one another" (Brown 1970, 607). Once again, although this is an old command (Lev. 19:18) the newness is the call to mimic with one another the expressed love that Christ exhibited (Morris 1995, 562).

As we read John 13:34-35 for instruction, we also must read it as a workable model. Couples may begin to unpack the New Command with questions like: How did Jesus love? What does it mean to wash the feet of my spouse? What does it mean for me to lay down my life for another? With Jesus as our mentor and model, we may act in confident obedience towards greater and more effective love for those closest to us.

### *Thinking Biblically*

The exploration of the New Mandate leads to passages and verses that may be relevant to the discussion. The New Testament includes several other "one another" verses as well as numerous verses on the theme of love. Specifically, a few of the key "one another" verses for marriage health and vitality include: serve one another - John 13:14, edify one another (healthy

communication) - 1 Thessalonians 5:11, have peace with one another (conflict resolution) - Romans 12:16; 14:13.

In the Farewell Discourse, Jesus talks of loving “one another” not only in John 13:34-35 but also in John 15. This offers expanded insight into the command. In this passage, Jesus exhorts His disciples to remain faithful, obey His commands, be sacrificial in their love, and bear fruit. First Corinthians 13 is the standard chapter Christians go to when they want to get a snapshot of the subject of love. A serious study of both this passage and John 15:9-17, with the foundation and view of mutually beneficial reciprocal love, provides the knowledge and wisdom needed to move towards redemptive relationships.

### Theological Foundation

A Biblical foundation provides a solid footing for health relationships within the marital context. Yet, we must go further and consider the theological implications of our biblical understanding. Therefore, exploration of ecclesiology, pneumatology, and soteriology will provide further clarity for a beneficial theology of marital relationships.

### *Ecclesiology*

We begin this project with the presupposition that the context for the married couples involved is the body of Christ and that the marriage unit is a foundational relationship within the local church. With this in mind, we recognize that the church is often known by its functional aspects. If one were to ask what the church is, the natural answer would include: a gathered body of believers, a

worshipping community, an institution of proclamation, a group of Christ-followers serving this world in the name of their leader. Thinking in terms of the pragmatic will give us an adequate picture of the whole. There are specific functions that best point to the necessity of relational harmony as a key aspect of the church's existence and, therefore, to marital health. These functions serve as an expression and outlet for relational harmony and as a sign and symbol of the healthy life of the body of Christ.

The Lord's Supper, which according to Stanley Grenz is one of the premier sacraments above the other options, is an act of commitment to God and His church (Grenz 1994, 520). It is a primary sign and symbol of reconciliation, love, and God's activity among us. Therefore, it stands to reason, as the church participates in this sign of bread and wine, we should be attentive to the relational aspects of the act. Participation in the Lord's Supper calls for an evaluation of unity with one another in Christ (Vanhoozer 2005, 411).

The preaching of the Word is the key mark of Protestant understanding of the Church (Oden 1992, 299). It is the gospel of reconciliation and love. It speaks as a means of grace, healing for the soul, and nourishment for the poor and weak (Bloesch 1998, 72). In short, it is a primary means of spiritual formation. A Pietistic point of view regards the role of the Bible and teaching as spiritual formation which speaks salvation and nourishment to believers for a healthy community life with others and with God (Grenz 1994, 389). The Word, when preached to believers in encouragement and support of spiritual formation, delivers a message that focuses primarily on relational health. In light of this

focus, a more holistic approach to spiritual formation seeks to have a teacher of information and a preacher of transformation. Transformation should be primary in nature for relational harmony. To ignore a community-based transformational spiritual formation is to grieve and quench the Spirit of God, which ultimately disrupts the harmony of the church (Bloesch 1998, 84).

The Communion of the Saints is a recurrent theme in the New Testament. It expresses life together with fellow believers in this age and the age to come. The full picture of the theology surrounding the Communion of the Saints is connected to the present age– with incomplete knowledge – and the age to come – with its fuller knowledge. In the midst of this are relationships that are and will be improving and growing, one with another. We are called to this communion. We are to be active in this communion. (Oden 1992, 464-465). Faith in God through Christ Jesus draws us towards one another in community life rather than the lonesome travails of a pilgrim. Relational health within the marriage unit should reflect this Communion of the Saints.

The final function of the church to be considered as a foundation for marital relationship health is that of the Pastoral role. Pastors have a tremendous responsibility with regard to relational harmony. If pastors are not relationally healthy, then the church's opportunity for growth and success are impacted. The pastoral roles of teacher, model, and mediator contribute to marriage health (Boyatzis, Goleman and Mckee 2002, 39). A pastor's role may be fulfilled through the functions of the office, namely, preaching, teaching, leading worship, and evangelism; but his ultimate call is to prepare God's people

for works of service (Ephesians 4:12) (Grenz 1994, 563). In so doing, the pastor helps to shape the relational health of the congregation so that the people of a particular fellowship are effective in their call to do works of service. Stanley Grenz summarizes this well when he states, "Fundamentally, the pastoral office is to facilitate the well-functioning of the community. To this end, the pastor keeps before the members the vision of the community ideal, the design of God toward which the local fellowship directs its energies" (Grenz 1994, 563).

### *Pneumatology*

Foundational to Christian belief is the concept of the Trinity. We worship one God in three persons. Each person of the Godhead has a specific role and characteristic. One role of the Holy Spirit is to serve as the bond between the Father and the Son. Love is the fundamental essence of this Trinitarian relationship (Grenz 1994, 71-72). Stanley Grenz effectively draws out the implications of this for believers when he writes the following:

At the heart of the Christian understanding of God is the declaration that God is triune – Father, Son, and Spirit. This means that in his eternal essence the one God is a social reality, the social Trinity. Because God is the social Trinity, a plurality in unity, the ideal for humankind does not focus on solitary persons, but on persons-in-community. God intends that we reflect his nature in our lives. This is only possible, however, as we move out of our isolation and into relationships with others. The ethical life, therefore, is the life-in-relationship, or the life-in-community. (Grenz 1994, 76)

Relational Harmony is modeled for believers in the Trinity. The character of the God who made us in His image is that of unity. Therefore, we are called to exhibit this harmonious lifestyle with one another both in action and in our very essence.

Active body life can be seen within the activity of the Holy Spirit. Erickson reminds us that the Holy Spirit gives life, power, unity, sensitivity to the Lord's leading, guidance into truth, gifts to serve, purity and holiness (Erickson 1996, 1039-1041). As the Holy Spirit imparts these gifts, we respond in community life. Each activity of the Spirit breathes health and life into the church. Without our submission to and engagement with the Holy Spirit's working, we are a dysfunctional people.

Therefore, due to the relational nature of God, the engaging role of the Holy Spirit, and our active response to the movement of the Spirit, we can expect marriages to have a need for and growth in relational health and harmony.

### *Soteriology*

Our doctrine of the human constitution relates to human interaction. When we comprehend our constitution, we can better understand ourselves and our relationship one to another (Erickson 1996, 456-462). We are the created of God. We are each created as diverse beings but remain unified as one. Erickson offers an understanding of our human constitution as "conditional unity" (Erickson 1996, 536-439). Our present state is temporary and we will be complete at the resurrection. We are affected in every aspect of our lives by the curse of sin. Therefore, our redemption is necessary for relational wholeness.

We are social beings and created for social interaction (Erickson 1996, 470). Sin is not just failure, or falling short, or missing the mark but it also entails a disruption of community both with God and with others (Grenz 1994, 186-187). Sin within the world directly affects our relationships with others through self-

centered competition, the inability or lack of desire to empathize with others, the rejection and disrespect of authority, and the inability to love others (Erickson 1996, 618-619). These are all marks of the influence of sin on our relational world.

Therefore, God interceded in the world to redeem corrupted creation. This redemptive work through Jesus Christ united us to God and with one another. Specifically, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ provides an opportunity for the unity of all who are believers in Him, both in spiritual reality and practice (Oden 1992, 211).

“Relational theology” is concerned with the effects of sin on interpersonal relationships. This view holds that individuals are “deficient” in relationships and that there is a “fundamental lack of harmony” where healthy community should be (Erickson 1996, 889). In light of this view, we can now address relational harmony as a result of holiness. This is our relationship with one another, set apart, as a by-product of the redemptive work of God. Our relationship with one another requires the intercession of the redemptive work of God through Jesus Christ in order for us to experience and share sanctification and holiness. Further, then, the health of marriages is influenced by the regenerating and sanctifying work God has done for His people.

#### Historical Foundation

George Fox was the founder of the Society of Friends -- or Quakers -- with which Orange Friends Church is affiliated. He lived much of his life as a single man who was focused on sharing the gospel. He did not marry until he reached

his mid-forties. It was at that time that he married Margaret Fell, who, being in her fifties, had been widowed for several years. Margaret had already been active in the Quaker movement, and after marrying George, she continued as a partner in ministry, becoming known as the mother of the Friends movement (Williams 1962, 48-51). George and Margaret Fell Fox led by example. They believed firmly in the message they were carrying and the movement they were leading. They endured hardship and experienced victories for the sake of Christ. They also enjoyed simple days in the company of one another (Williams 1962, 51). This is the historical foundation for the theology of marriage in the Friends Church. This is a foundation of simple, yet profound, love and commitment. This is a commitment to the call of Christ and to one another.

This specific theology of marriage reminds me of the partnership between Priscilla and Aquila, mentioned in the book of Acts. In Acts 18 we learn that this married couple, who were Christ followers, were also business partners. They supported the ministry of Paul and they participated in teaching and evangelism (Acts 18:2, 18, 26). From a historical perspective, many married couples between the time of Priscilla and Aquila and the time of George and Margaret Fox are models for relational health and ministry impact simultaneously. It is with this understanding that we can affirm that two are better than one. Furthermore, we add that two together in relational health are better than two at odds in relational dysfunction.

Worship in the Quaker tradition is simple. Although this is not the specific practice of most Friends Churches today, silent worship, or worship based on

“Holy Obedience,” is a practical application of the overarching theology of simplicity (Trueblood 1966, 88). This historically held theology impacts every area of faith and practice, including special ceremonies like weddings and special relationships like marriages. Quakers married in community, without clergy participation, but rather, with the community “officiating” and affirming the union of the man and woman (Trueblood 1966, 102-103). The marriage relationship was so valued by the community that a simple ceremony affirmed the importance of relational health lived in the context of an accountable, Spirit-led body of believers.

Two other historical attributes impact the foundational stance for relationship health. Quakers have historically held a strong peace and justice testimony. The peace testimony has been present since the founding of the movement (Trueblood 1966, 187). This has played out primarily in the call for the abolition of war, but the heart of the matter has always been a call for the practice of relational health through peaceful resolution and conflict management. George Fox wrote in response to challengers of this testimony:

Our principle is and our practices have always been to seek peace and ensue it and to follow after righteousness and the knowledge of God, seeking the good and welfare and doing that which tends to the peace of all. (Vipont 1977, 81)

Therefore, the application of a peace testimony has been at work with conflict between nations as well as familial relationships.

The famous Quaker abolitionist, John Woolman, was steadfast in his work to seek justice for the enslaved. His work included a testimony for the value of the marriage of the enslaved. He wrote emphatically that slaves who were

married should not be separated from one another. He further called for the recognition of slave marriages (Woolman 1961, 58-59). This heart for justice for the enslaved was a reflection of the value and sanctity Quakers placed on all marriages.

Therefore, marriage health and vitality has been a constant value of the people called Quakers. These have been followers of Christ who have sought a genuine and direct experience with the living Christ. As a result of this personal encounter with God, Friends have been a people who seek to live out a primitive Christianity in faith and practice. In so doing, these people of simple faith have shown value in relational harmony with all, especially within the family unit.

### Contemporary Foundation

There is benefit from exploring the biblical, theological, and historic foundations of relational health within the context of marriage. These foundations could stand without further consideration. Yet, a contemporary foundation gives a fuller account going forward. When addressing a contemporary foundation, we will look at the benefits of marriage, a few key aspects of healthy marriages, and the most effective strategies used to help couples achieve health and growth.

A healthy marriage benefits the individuals in the relationship, their families, and society at large. On average, married people enjoy a healthier lifestyle, longer life, more satisfying sexual relationships, happiness, and increased wealth (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 18-19). In his book, *Why Marriage Matters*, Glenn Stanton emphasized the importance of marriage by comparing married and unmarried individuals. He concluded that there are

“broad differences in the areas of alcoholism, suicide, morbidity and mortality, mental health, self-reported happiness, stress, and general well-being” (Stanton 1997, 73). Those who are married benefit greatly, while those who are never married, single-divorced, or widowed show higher levels of unhealthy attributes and behaviors. Furthermore, homes with two-parent married families tend to have children who are more successful academically, are involved with less risky behaviors, and exhibit emotional health. Children without this type of environment have a higher probability of being raised in poverty and to have a lower quality of life (Olson, Olson-Sigg, Larson 2008, 19-20). Research has confirmed time and time again that stable two-parent homes are beneficial to the larger family unit, particularly children. Healthy marriages make healthy communities. The inverse would be true as well. Simply stated, “As marriage weakens, the costs are borne not only by individual children and families but by all “ (Waite and Gallagher 2000, 186). Glenn Stanton summarizes his assessment of the research on the importance of marriage for society by saying:

Therefore, it is in our society’s best interest to do what it can to value and encourage marriage and have our community’s mediating structures work to strengthen marriage on a family-by-family basis. The benefit of marriage for children is even more pronounced.... A culture wise enough to favor marriage... will reap the benefits of citizens who enjoy healthy, strong, happy, sound, productive, and long-lived lives. (Stanton 1997, 95)

Therefore, healthy marriages are important for the life of the individuals, families and society at large.

Foundational to this project is an understanding of what makes a healthy marriage. There are many important habits, skills, attitudes, and understandings,

but, for our purposes, I will highlight a few of the essential elements. The following is not exhaustive, but is adequate. Some relationship experts assert that key attributes of relationship health includes positive communication skills, conflict resolution skills, feelings of satisfaction, and a mutually beneficial reciprocal relationship (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 22-23).

Communication and conflict resolution skills are at the core of thriving marriages (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 22-23). Conflict resolution and communication work closely together. Both skills involve seeking to understand the viewpoint of the other person in the marriage, increasing effort on behaviors that may not feel natural, and the ability to be flexible for a mutually beneficial solution. Increased communication skills allow individuals in a marriage to hear, be heard, understand, and be understood. We oftentimes cannot predict our partner's thinking or feelings. In fact, research shows that couples can only predict their partner's view of marriage twenty five percent of the time (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 8). Increased communication skills will increase the health of the marriage.

The ability to resolve conflict in a positive way is another key skill for marital health and vibrancy. Unfortunately, although conflict is present in every marriage, many couples avoid conflict when it arises (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 59). Couples may have a natural inclination to avoid conflict, but those marriages that learn conflict resolution skills are much happier (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 70).

Couples who are thriving indicate higher levels of satisfaction. Many positive habits may lead a couple towards greater levels of satisfaction. One such habit is the ability to identify strengths and areas of growth, yet married couples are less likely to see their strengths clearly when they are facing challenges in their relationship (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 9-10). Therefore, satisfaction grows as couples clearly see areas of growth and identify strengths.

Finally, the understanding of shared life together and living for one another plays an important role in marital vibrancy. This is particularly challenging in our individualistic, postmodern culture (Cherlin 2009, 192-193). Habits of many couples lead to self-preservation and self-focus. Couples must form the habit of purposeful, mutually beneficial reciprocal relationships. These marriages occur when each individual is mutually attentive to the needs and concerns of their partner and works at speaking into those needs. This attitude and behavior exhibits a high level of commitment, happiness, and satisfaction.

There are best practices that the church, marriage advocates, and couples can engage to help couples move toward relationship health. These include, but are not limited to, premarital education, marriage education, relationship coaching, and marriage mentoring. The focus of this project is how best practices may be administered within the context of the local church. I would agree with those that advocate for the faith community to be on the forefront of marriage strengthening and health. The Church is “uniquely positioned and individually commissioned to care for the cultural and domestic well-being of marriage”

(Stanton 1997, 172-173). Therefore, churches should strive to offer thorough marriage preparation and enrichment like the Prepare-Enrich program.

Investment in training clergy and marriage mentors to facilitate this program with every couple wishing to marry within their church context could increase marital satisfaction and reduce the divorce rate with these couples by up to 30% (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 6). Furthermore, there can be a significant impact with married couples that may be facing crisis or simply needing enrichment (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 7).

Coaching and mentoring places a trained individual or couple with a couple who is seeking growth. Often times support materials, skill development, and listening techniques are successfully implemented with the couple in need. In fact, using mentoring or coaching with the Prepare-Enrich tool has shown to increase the impact upon marriages (Wages and Darling 2004, 103). Therefore, a coaching or mentoring strategy can be an effective practice.

Relationship education is oftentimes implemented in a group setting with a facilitator. Participation is couples-centered rather than individualistic.

Participants in this format can represent all levels of relationship health and stages. Relationship education programs have been shown to be beneficial for couples who are struggling with their relationship vitality as well as those who have a healthy status (DeMaria 2005, 242).

This project is based on the foundation that healthy marriage is important to individuals, families, and communities. Furthermore, healthy status is understood to include communication, conflict resolution, satisfaction, and

mutually beneficial reciprocal relational attitude and practice. The church can help couples achieve higher levels of health through relationship education, coaching and mentoring with the support and assistance of an assessment tool like Prepare-Enrich.

### **Context**

This project was implemented through the marriage ministry at Orange Friends Church. Therefore, the participants were married and engaged couples who were regular attendees of Orange Friends Church, attendees of other churches surrounding Orange Friends Church, and couples who were not regularly attending any church at that time. All of the married couples involved represented all levels of marriage health. Some of the couples were conflicted or devitalized in their relationship and others were in harmonious or vitalized relationships. No matter what their relationship status, the couples who participated had room for growth and development.

Like most churches, Orange Friends Church cares for the health of marriages and its ability to help relationships inside and outside of the church. This church's hope is to offer assistance towards healthier marriages and a clear gospel message for participants who are not part of a church home yet. It is also a value of the marriage ministry of this church to serve other churches through ministries that build relational health between couples within their congregations.

The marriage ministry at Orange Friends Church was underdeveloped at the time of this project. The church included about one hundred regular attending adults. Out of this number, leadership for ministry that is focused on marriage

health has been void. My wife and I had been the sole champions for this effort in addition to our work in many other areas within the church that were in need of development. Therefore, the Prepare-Enrich group program served not only as a path toward healthy marriages, but was also a conduit for leadership development and vision for expanded marriage ministry.

### **Project Goals**

The purpose of this project was to impact the relationship health of participating married couples at Orange Friends Church through the Prepare-Enrich Group Program. The research question was: To what extent did the Prepare-Enrich Group Program impact the relationship health of select married couples at Orange Friends Church? The goals for this project were:

1. To impact participating couples through the discovery of the status of their relationship health.
2. To impact participating individuals through the discovery of how they may be contributing towards the status of the relationship health of their marriage.
3. To impact participating couples through the increase of practical communication skills.
4. To impact participating couples through the increase of practical conflict resolution skills.
5. To impact participating couples through the increase of the level of satisfaction in their relationship.
6. To impact participating couple's feelings of being better equipped to continuously mature in the health of their relationship.

## Design, Procedure, and Assessment

The purpose of this project was to impact the relationship health of participating married couples at Orange Friends Church, Lewis Center, Ohio, through the Prepare-Enrich Group Program. The design of the program was a six session group experience covering various relationship topics. The weekly sessions included an agenda of the Prepare-Enrich curriculum designed for a group of couples. This material was led by my wife and me, who are trained and certified facilitators with Prepare-Enrich. Couples experienced group discussion, teaching from the facilitators, couple-centered exercises, and suggestions for further application between sessions. The Prepare-Enrich experience rested on each couple taking a pre-session inventory that measured relationship health. Each individual took the inventory online one week prior to the group experience. The inventories were then interpreted by the facilitators and the results were disseminated throughout the program to customize each couple's experience and to aid couples in learning and growing. Couples were self-selected from those who were regular attendees at Orange Friends Church, attendees from other Lewis Center area churches, and couples in the community with no church affiliation. The sixty-to-ninety minute sessions were held weekly on Wednesday evenings at Orange Friends Church in Lewis Center, Ohio.

Individuals were given a pre-test of eighteen closed-ended questions based on the project goals at the first session. The participants were given a post-test of the same eighteen questions at the end of the final session. The post-test included six additional open-ended questions that requested personal

feedback. The quantitative questions were phrased as statements using an agreement scale with six choices from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Each of six project goals had three quantitative questions and one qualitative question for measurement of impact. Forty-three individuals (representing twenty-two couples) voluntarily, anonymously, and confidentially completed a pre-test and a post-test for this project. One individual from the twenty-two couples did not complete both assessments.

### **Personal Goals**

I was raised in a dysfunctional home. I grew up seeing and experiencing the effects of an unhealthy marriage. I became a follower of Jesus Christ when I was a teenager. This was a transformational experience for me. In the face of my dysfunctional background, Jesus Christ offered wholeness, hope, and healing. During my late teen years, I felt a strong call into ministry. As a result of this call, God led me to work in youth ministry for the next several years. The longer I worked with adolescents, the more I recognized that many of the challenging issues that teenagers faced were directly related to the health of their parent's marriage. This was also my personal experience as I grew up. This realization has led me to invest in marriage health and vibrancy. The last several years I have been involved with marriage ministry directly, as well as indirectly, through pastoral ministry. This has included the opportunity to be trained as a facilitator and a seminar director for Prepare-Enrich. Marriage health not only impacts the lives of children, but entire communities and the culture at large. I desire for all marriages to experience health and vibrancy. God has blessed me with the

opportunity to speak into relationships that they may grow towards greater health. To this end, my personal goals for this project were:

1. After completing this project, I anticipated that I would know the best practices for marriage enrichment in the context of the church. (knowledge)
2. After completing this project, I anticipated that I would be able to effectively train relationship professionals in the Prepare-Enrich group program. (skills)
3. After completing this project, I anticipated that I would be able to effectively facilitate the Prepare-Enrich group program in various contexts for premarital and marital couples. (skills)
4. After completing this project, I anticipated that I would be more acutely attuned to the relationship needs of couples. (Growth, transformation)
5. After completing this project, I anticipated that I would have matured in my understanding of the sovereign transformational power of God over marital relationships. (Spiritually)

### **Definition of Terms**

**Prepare-Enrich (P/E)** – This is a scientifically validated relationship inventory and couples assessment tool which is used as a foundational program for premarital counseling, marriage enrichment, couples therapy, marriage mentoring and marriage education (Knutson and Olson 2003, 530).

**Marriage Education/Enrichment** – Marriage education and enrichment are programmatic opportunities for individuals and/or couples that are intended to

educate, inform, and enrich the individuals or couples in their marriage within a group context (Hawkins and VanDenBerghe 2014, 8).

**Vitalized** – Couples who score significantly high on the P/E assessment indicate high relationship health and are considered vitalized. Typically, couples in this category are most satisfied with their relationship and are skilled in communication and conflict resolution (Larson, Olson and Olson-Sigg 2008, 24-28; Knutson and Olson 2003, 542).

**Harmonious** – Couples who score moderately high on the P/E assessment indicate moderate to high relationship health and are considered harmonious. Typically, couples in this category have high levels of satisfaction in many areas of their relationship (Larson, Olson and Olson-Sigg 2008, 24-28; Knutson and Olson 2003, 542).

**Conventional** – Couples who score moderate on the P/E assessment indicate moderate relationship health and are considered conventional. Typically, couples in this category are often highly committed to one another, but lack skills in communication and conflict resolution (Larson, Olson and Olson-Sigg 2008, 24-28; Knutson and Olson 2003, 542).

**Conflicted** – Couples who score moderately low on the P/E assessment indicate moderate-to-poor relationship health and are considered conflicted. Typically, couples in this category have lower satisfaction and often struggle in many areas of their relationship (Larson, Olson and Olson-Sigg 2008, 24-28; Knutson and Olson 2003, 542).

**Devitalized** – Couples who score significantly low on the P/E assessment indicate poor relationship health and are considered devitalized. Typically, couples in this category would have the lowest levels of satisfaction and have growth areas in almost every aspect of their relationship (Larson, Olson and Olson-Sigg 2008, 24-28; Knutson and Olson 2003, 542).

**Marriage Coaching** – An individual or a couple who adopts a strategy of marriage coaching will work with a couple towards achieving goals that relate to their marriage. This may include instruction, but often times the coach will enlist exercises and discussion that lead the couple towards achieving goals related to greater relationship health (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 1801).

**Marriage Mentoring** – Typically marriage mentoring is facilitated by a mentor couple with a couple who is seeking guidance in marriage growth and wellness. Marriage mentoring will rely on the strategy of instruction and modeling from the mentor couple (Parrott and Parrott 2005, 19).

**Marriage Counseling** – Distinctive from coaching and mentoring, marriage counseling is facilitated by a trained, licensed, and certified counselor. Most often this is done with couples who have more critical relationship issues, emotional imbalance, or extremely unhealthy marriages that may carry complexities beyond the ability of marriage mentors or coaches (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 1801).

### **Plan of the Paper**

I have briefly explained in this chapter the project in summarized form. Once again, the purpose of this project was to impact the relationship health of

participating married couples at Orange Friends Church through the Prepare-Enrich Group Program. The research question was: To what extent does the Prepare-Enrich Group Program impact the relationship health of select married couples at Orange Friends Church?

The rest of this dissertation will present a more complete view of the project. Chapter Two will include biblical, historical, and theological foundations; a review of contemporary literature is covered in Chapter Three; a detailed description of the method, procedures, and design of the project are presented in Chapter Four; and Chapter Five is a treatment of the results. Finally, Chapter Six deals with the implications of the results in a practical manner in a ministry context.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

The church should be a source and guide, pointing toward strong marriage. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Many marriages are struggling inside and outside of the church. There are some occasions where even pastors and church leaders struggle to find relational health and vitality within their marriages, yet they continue to move along in ministry without help or hope.

Pastor Tom has been the pastor at First Church for five years. The church has been in a numerical growth pattern during this time period and presently has 250 regular attendees. First Church started because of a split twenty years ago and has experienced noticeable conflict within its body since its inception.

Pastor Tom and his wife, Sue, have been married fifteen years. They have a struggling marriage. Sue has primarily focused on homeschooling their four children and running many of the children's ministries at the church. Pastor Tom has rarely taken a day off and has taken only one week of vacation each year. A few of the Elders at First Church have marriages that are healthy, but many marriages in the church are not as healthy as they should or could be. As a result, there have been one or two marriages in crisis each year at First Church.

Pastor Tom has felt ill-equipped for working with crisis marriages. He also has felt overwhelmed by his many pastoral duties, to the neglect of any kind of proactive marriage ministry. In spite of this, Pastor Tom has always counseled

couples in the most professional way he knows and advertised the occasional national marriage conference that was available in the local area.

Tom and Sue came to a critical point one evening after both pushed through a long, difficult day with their given responsibilities. Their neglect of one another and their lack of awareness of the others' needs had reached a breaking point. The conflict began with a tense discussion that led to shouting and ended with both going to opposite ends of the house.

In the aftermath of this conflict, the pastoral couple felt trapped in this difficulty because of the desire to keep their marriage troubles private and to present a healthy front to their needy congregation. In spite of this, they both knew things could not continue the way they had been going. They both felt as if it were a choice between remaining in a conflicted marriage while continuing the ministry they felt called to by God, or being free from the stress by ending the relationship, which would damage their ministry and relationships at First Church.

However, there was a third alternative where they could have experienced a path of transformation through redemptive relationships that result in relational harmony and growth. Scripture, theology, and our historic roots offer key insight, encouragement, and vision for relational health and long-lasting, healthy marriages. These foundations can lay an understanding, not only for the marriage of Pastor Tom and Sue, but also for the other marriages represented in the First Church family, as well as the marriages within their surrounding community.

Adopting a plan and program based on the “New Mandate” (John 13:34-35) to “love one another” would increase relational vitality within marriages, thus creating a biblical foundation. Theological reflection upon the role of the local church, the Holy Spirit, and the redemptive process aids couples and church marriage ministry efforts. In addition, God has moved throughout history, giving us a foundation for relational harmony springing forth from redemptive relationships. Specifically, within the Quaker movement, marital health and vitality have played an integral role. Therefore, biblical, theological, and historic reflection lays a solid foundation for marriages at all stages. The following is a concise treatment of these underpinning components.

### **Biblical Foundation**

The biblical foundation shows that John 13:34-35 is a relevant command for marital health within the local church. The New Mandate, as it is called, is a call to love one another as Christ has loved us. It is my conclusion that when a specific marriage reflects on and applies this understanding, the spouses will develop better relational health. This command is best understood as a call to a covenant, to mutually beneficial, reciprocal relationships, and to follow the example of Christ.

### **General Background**

The first areas to be addressed are background and context. Due to the limitations on the length of this project, there are only a few foundational issues that we will examine. The command to love one another is set in the Gospel

according to John. Chapters 13-17 make up what is known as the Farewell Discourse that was delivered by Jesus in the Upper Room on the night He was arrested. It is thought that the chapters may be several different sections brought together over time due to the story-telling process, but the sections all seem to point to Johannine authorship (Moloney 2005, 260-61). Although there are various suppositions concerning the cohesiveness and original nature of the Farewell Discourse, many scholars believe the best alternative is to take the text as it is presented to us: as one complete unit (Morris 1995, 560).

The discourse begins with an introduction of vv.31-38 (Brown 1970, 596-97). Previous to this, Jesus had washed the disciples' feet and challenged them to also wash one another's feet. He spoke of His betrayer, and Judas was revealed to be this person. Upon being exposed, Judas made a hasty exit. Jesus then addressed the remaining disciples about His glorification and their impending lives without His physical presence.

At this point, Jesus shared the central message of His extended remarks: love one another as I have loved you. This message is clarified by Christ as an indication or evidence of discipleship (Moloney 2005, 11-13). The New Commandment was shared by Christ in an environment that was emotionally confusing and extremely difficult for the disciples.

### *Relational Clarity in Discomfort and Conflict*

It is safe to say that the new command to love one another was given to a group of disciples who were fearful, doubting, struggling and relationally uncertain. For example, (1) the master and teacher took on the role of a servant

and washed the followers' feet, (2) one of the members of the disciples' inner-circle was announced as a betrayer and left the room, (3) the teacher, whom these people have followed for the last three years, repeats emphatically that He is departing and they are unable to go where He is going. This band of disciples was dealing with conflict at many levels, in many ways at this moment.

Therefore, Jesus is interjecting not just a farewell discourse, but a consolatory discourse. In addition, the passage not only takes on a declarative posture, but we can also read a message of comfort (Parsenios 2002, 218, 221, 231).

Francis Moloney shares that this knowledge of conflict and discouragement on the part of the disciples provides a good understanding for a sacramental reading of the Farewell Discourse. A sacramental reading helps us hear more of what God would have for us to hear in this text. Moloney reminds us that Jesus knows His disciples. When Jesus gives the New Mandate, He is exhorting a group of disciples who are in need of love and redemption. They have failed and are ignorant, but He loves them fully. He knows of their betrayal, denial, and selfishness. Despite these behaviors, Christ calls them to love one another as He has loved them (Moloney 1991, 247). According to Moloney,

It is in the acceptance of these failed, yet loved, disciples that one will receive both Jesus and the Father. It is Jesus' choosing and sending ignorant and failing disciples, dramatically portrayed in the abject failure of both Judas and Peter, that Jesus' uniqueness and oneness with God can be seen. His love for his failing disciples is, above all, the final proof for his claim to be the one who makes God known (17:2-3). (Moloney 1991, 249)

This is truly redemptive relationship through the clarifying lens of Jesus Christ in the midst of crisis and grief. Therefore, loving one another gives relational clarity within a marital relationship where there is discomfort and conflict. No marriage is

free from stress or void of relational challenges. Recognizing the biblical context of the New Mandate gives insight for practical application within the marital context.

### Marriage as Redemptive Relationships

As we have seen, we are commanded to love one another in the midst of conflict and crisis and in the face of our own self-interest. This is the context of the New Mandate, and it is the context for marriages within the local church. Conflict, crisis, disappointment, self-interest, and ignorance are areas of unhealthy existence that can be touched by the redeeming nature of the new command. This is biblically infused transformation, which is necessary for the living of redemptive relationships.

Redemptive relationships are relational connections that have been transformed by the power of Christ. These are the types of relationships that have been empowered to live out the New Mandate. These relationships turn up throughout the New Testament, where they were revolutionary due to their parallels to a covenantal relationship, their reciprocal nature (giving and receiving love), and their fixture of Jesus as the primary model (Chennattu 2006, 97). This is where we will now turn our attention.

#### *The Covenant Relationship*

Chennattu wrote about the nature of the new covenant within the Gospel of John and more specifically with the New Mandate. "There is no better metaphor than the OT covenant relationship to describe this love and

communion that should exist among the disciples, between the disciples and Jesus, and between Jesus and the Father" (Chennattu 2006, 98). Earlier, we discussed the conciliatory nature that the Farewell Discourse has, and now we can also say that it contains a covenant discourse as well. Chennattu adds that a "covenant relationship is implied by both the covenant command and the covenant sign: love for one another (13:34-35)" (Chennattu 2006, 83). This command inherently implies covenant. Just as in the Old Testament the Ten Commandments had to be observed in order for Israel to be God's chosen people, this New Commandment is given whereby they will be known as the disciples of Christ (Brown 1970, 612). In fact, the New Command is "new" because it is connected to the new covenant of the last supper in the Upper Room (Brown 1970, 614).

Therefore, the New Mandate carries with it a covenantal relationship that binds us to God and to one another. As Chennattu states, "The biblical metaphor of covenant . . . signifies and implies a binding relationship based on commitment" (Chennattu 2006, 50-51). A Christian marriage is a covenant relationship. The act of obedience demonstrated by loving one another in a covenantal way builds up the relationship between the disciple and God (Parsenios 2002, 226). Chennattu further clarifies what Jesus emphasized:

The best way of expressing our love for God and keeping his commandments is by loving fellow humans. It is in this context that we understand the command "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18). Sharing life with one's covenant partner is very essential to a covenant relationship. The life that the individuals hold is not private property, but something common, which has to be shared with others. In brief, keeping the commandments, loving and sharing the life with others, are intrinsic to the nature of a covenant relationship. (Chennattu 2006, 65)

### *Mutually Edifying, Reciprocal Relationships*

The understanding of love in the first-century Mediterranean world was different than in contemporary America. If you claimed to love someone or something or some group at that time and place, you would have been expressing attachment. This attachment would be much like saying you are a fan of this or that today. But to love one another in the way that Jesus has commanded requires a mutually edifying, reciprocal relationship. It speaks of loyalty, value, and reliability fleshed out within the relationship (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998, 228).

Furthermore, married couples are not called to be merely fans of their partner, but they are called to have a bond of active and engaged commitment. This redeemed relationship is a dynamic and practical experience. Reciprocal relationships seek to console, serve, care for and understand the needs of the other disciple. In so doing, each person involved in this redeemed relationship is standing in the stead of the love of Jesus, who is not physically present (Brown 1970, 614). Mutually beneficial, reciprocal relationships express loyalty as a result of loving awareness. In addition, New Mandate relationships mirror the example of Jesus Christ.

### *Jesus, the Model of Redemptive Relationships*

Love is the central command in John 13:34-35, and this love is shown most clearly through the death and resurrection of Christ (Morris 1995, 560). Jesus has loved the disciples and showed them the full extent of His love (foot

washing) and will love them through the cross (see also Philippians 2:5-8). Therefore, they are to love one another (Morris 1995, 562). As we digest scripture, the example of Jesus to His disciples becomes our example as well. Raymond Brown says that John 13:34 could be rendered, "I have loved you in order that you also love one another" (Brown 1970, 607). Once again, although this is an old command (Lev. 19:18) the mandate is new because it is now a call to mimic with one another the expressed love that Christ exhibited (Morris 1995, 562).

Jesus' death is the model for community. His acts of service, love and even death on the cross are the path the disciples are asked to take as well. Through this imitation of His modeling, the world may know that He is Lord. This is God's plan for the redemption of His creation (Culpepper 1991, 147). Love is the theme of Jesus' life and teaching. He taught it and modeled it. His disciples are to live it and teach it (Moloney 2005, 99). The disciples may not have fully grasped the extent of the words of Jesus that night in the Upper Room, but they experienced them in the ensuing hours as their leader was arrested, tried, convicted, and put to death on the cross. Things began to come together for them as the resurrection occurred and Pentecost passed. They were to become a community of self-giving, reciprocally loving followers of the risen Christ (Moloney 2005, 109).

### On Relational Health

The healthy fruit of biblically transformed and redeemed relationships includes the influence upon those who witness such a change. This could be the

case for Pastor Tom and Sue, and this was the call of Jesus as He delivered the New Mandate. Very simply, the love Christians have for one another is the real symbol of Christ's presence in this world. It is *the* distinguishing mark of Christianity (Morris 1995, 562). The disciples were called to love one another, and this love would set them apart. They would be noticed and marked as peculiar people who loved unlike the society at large (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998, 9). This not only sets them and us apart, but loving one another exhibits our unity with God and His people and brings glory to God (Moloney 2005, 266). Raymond Brown goes further on this point by stating, ". . . Christian apologists would call upon the impact made by Christian love as a standard argument for the superiority of Christianity" (Brown 1970, 607). Living redeemed marital relationships through loving one another spreads the gospel and makes us participants in the creation of additional redeemed relationships.

In dealing with Pastor Tom and Sue at First Church, I turn to David Ray who wrote of the power of living out John 13:34-35 in a small church context. *The Big Small Church Book* reminds congregations like First Church of the implications of loving one another as Jesus calls us. We are to worship God, care for one another corporately, oppose individualism, commit to the whole through meeting basic human needs, recognize, celebrate, and maximize differences rather than allowing diversity to polarize, and intentionally resolve conflict in a positive way (Ray 1992, 104-114). This is the act of being disciples. The new commandment of love summons us to exercise our discipleship in the midst of our difficulties, failure, successes and celebrations; we are to make love

known: "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35 NIV) (Moloney 1991, 255). The fruit of the pastor and his wife living out a redeemed relationship through the love command will be a healthier congregation. Marriages that live out the New Mandate make a biblical impact on their world.

The exploration of the New Mandate leads to passages and verses that may be relevant to the discussion. The New Testament includes several other "one another" verses, as well as numerous verses on the theme of love. After considering the implications of "love one another", it would be helpful to Pastor Tom and Sue to reflect on some of the other texts that are applicable. Reflection includes the digestion of the Word of God with a heart towards transformation. Specifically, a few of the key "one another" verses for marriage health and vitality include: serve one another (sacrifice) - John 13:14, edify one another (healthy communication) - 1 Thessalonians 5:11, have peace with one another (conflict resolution) - Romans 12:16; 14:13.

In the Farewell Discourse, Jesus talks of loving "one another" not only in John 13:34-35 but also in John 15. This offers expanded insight into the command. In this passage, Jesus exhorts His disciples to remain faithful, obey His commands, be sacrificial in their love, and bear fruit. First Corinthians 13 is the standard reference chapter for Christians wanting to get a snapshot of the subject of love. A serious study of both this passage and John 15:9-17, with the foundation and view of mutually beneficial, reciprocal love, provides the

knowledge and wisdom needed to move towards redemptive marital relationships.

### Summary

There is hope and healing available for marriages. Redemptive relationships can result as couples engage the New Mandate and allow the New Mandate of Jesus to engage them. To be engaged by and to engage the scriptures means that marriage partners must be familiar with the information within the text and seek the transformation that flows from the text. This leads to relational harmony.

The New Mandate shows us the point of introduction to the New Covenant. It was given in the midst of crisis and grief to a group that was growing away from self-love and had a great need to be turned towards one another. As Jesus shared His heart and modeled His love, this group was given a new covenant that called for mutually edifying, reciprocal relationships. The redeemer of all things offered the words that carry redemption for their relationship with God and with others.

The way forward for marriages in the local church context is not free from conflict and pain, although the way forward holds redemption and healing. A proactive plan for couples that fleshes out the New Command includes attentiveness to the other, seeking understanding of the needs of the other, and deliberately acting on that knowledge. The Church will benefit greatly from marriages that model this “one another” love. It would also learn and grow from a deeper understanding of ecclesiology, pneumatology through an ecclesial lens,

and a healthy soteriological view of the Church. At this point, this is where we will turn our attention.

### **Theological Foundation**

The church can be viewed in many different ways with several different models. Avery Cardinal Dulles offers five primary models that can help in our understanding of the church: an institutional, a mystical communion, a sacrament, a herald, and a servant (Dulles 2002, 25). Each of these, when evaluated by the same standard, have relational harmony as a common thread. This is not the only common thread, but the relational represents a significant thread (Dulles 2002, 182-184). Each model of the church is dependent on relationships with others. There is no model of the church that is sufficient without the relational as a component. Therefore, there is no model of the Church that is truly healthy without the presence of relational harmony. This is not to insinuate relational perfection within the context of the church, but it is to propose healthy relationship in the imperfect form.

#### What is Relational Harmony?

Relational harmony has many facets and expressions. A clear understanding of relational harmony includes the expression of love in practical ways within the local church community. Relational harmony is a primary result of redeemed relationships like those discussed within the biblical foundation of this chapter. Once again, marital relationships are a cornerstone relational unit within the church context. In addition, active love leads to unity among believers in the

midst of diversity. Love expressed lends to the resolution of conflict in a positive way, rather than experiencing what Gene Heacock calls the “great division” of unity in kingdom work with God’s people (Heacock 2007, 80). Redemptive marital relationships have differences and disagreements. Ongoing expressions of love in the midst of potentially dividing scenarios lead to healthy marriages.

Therefore, we must explore with a theological lens the impact of relational harmony on ecclesial health. We must look at ecclesiology in order to assess its nature and functions. Pneumatology, in light of ecclesiology, will help us understand the nature of the Holy Spirit in our relational context. Finally, we will consider soteriology understood in relation to local church expression. The human constitution, the effects of sin, and the result of the redemptive process have a role in marital harmony in the local church context.

### Ecclesiology

The local church is often known by its functional aspects. If one were to ask what the church is, the natural answer could include any number of observable facets of church life: a gathered body of believers, a worshipping community, an institution of proclamation, or a group of Christ-followers serving this world in the name of their leader. Thinking in terms of the pragmatic will give us an adequate picture of the whole. There are specific functions that best point to the necessity of relational harmony as a key aspect of the church’s existence. These functions serve as an expression and outlet for relational harmony and as a sign and symbol of the healthy life of the body of Christ. Chief among the relationships in the local church context is the marital unit.

### *Theology of the Lord's Supper*

Quakers (The Religious Society of Friends) would historically adhere to the conviction that Communion should remain an inward experience and, therefore, is outwardly unnecessary. This belief has changed over the last century for those within the Evangelical Friends expression of this religious movement (Vipont 1977, 229-232). Therefore, the outward expression of Lord's Supper is a primary sign and symbol of reconciliation, love, and God's activity among many Christians today, including many Evangelical Friends.

Communion, which according to Stanley Grenz is one of the premier sacraments above the other options, is an act of commitment to God and His Church (Grenz 1994, 520). Therefore, it stands to reason that as the church participates in this sign of bread and wine, we should be attentive to the relational aspects of the act. There are three images that aid in clarifying the importance of these relationships.

Communion has what Erickson calls a "horizontal dimension" (Erickson 1996, 1112). That is to say that the church takes the sacrament as a community, not as individuals. Our partaking of the elements as one body indicates the need to be unified, rather than at odds, with one another. Erickson goes on to state that communion is "the property of the functioning *body* of Christ" (Erickson 1996, 1112). This is not to discount or disregard the vertical aspect of the act. The church that partakes while neglecting the Almighty does so in vain. The church that partakes while disrespecting and degrading the earthly relationship does so in shame. Dysfunctional behavior and this sacrament are not

compatible. Biblical instruction emphasizes the importance of the proactive peace of believers with one another (I Corinthians 11). When a wrong is committed by one member of the fellowship against another, the offending member is encouraged to seek reconciliation with the offended brother or sister (Erickson 1996, 815). Christ following spouses carry this responsibility to be at peace with one another.

A similar view is that of a community orientation. Stanley Grenz states that the act of the Lord's Supper "entails an ethical demand, as the Spirit reminds us that we belong to each other and consequently are to be concerned for the welfare of one another"(Grenz 1994, 539). By our participation in this ordinance, the Holy Spirit impresses upon us that our covenant with God and with one another is of utmost concern. We are strengthened, empowered, and refreshed for Christian living, victory over sin, and freedom from shame (Grenz 1994, 539-540).

This involves communion with God and communion with others. It requires a group of actors working in unison from the same script at the same time. Vanhoozer paints this image of the Eucharist as a "theodrama" (Vanhoozer 2005, 413). Communion is, therefore, a wonderful performance before God. This is not only a reminder of the great narrative through Jesus Christ, but also of our participation with one another in this drama. The sacrament of Eucharist is the great act of remembering His body being broken and blood being spilled for the sake of sinners who needed reconciliation with their Creator God.

Therefore, the images incorporated in this sign give us direction for seeking reconciliation with our spouse, proactively expressing care for one another, and working hand in hand with our co-worshipping partner before the table of the Lord. This triad of relational activity leads us into the path of the peace that passes understanding (Philippians 4:7). Participation in the Lord's Supper calls for an evaluation of this unity with married couples in Christ (Vanhoozer 2005, 411).

### *Theology of Spiritual Formation*

The preaching of the Word is the key mark of Protestant understanding of the church (Oden 1998, 299). Preaching represents the very Word of God. It is the gospel of reconciliation and love. It speaks as a means of grace, healing for the soul, and nourishment for the poor and weak (Bloesch 1998, 72). In short, it is a primary means of spiritual formation.

A Pietistic point of view regards the role of the Bible and teaching as spiritual formation which speaks salvation and nourishment to believers for a healthy community life with others and with God (Grenz 1994, 389). The preached Word used in a spiritually formative way is to be primarily one of relational health. If the preaching and proclamation of the Word is to be an instrument of salvation and ensuing spiritual development, then it should be an instrument of reconciliation among people (Bloesch 1998, 80). As people hear the whole counsel of God, they are being shaped relationally into more healthy beings and participants in the community (Bloesch 1998, 83).

In light of this, a more holistic approach of spiritual formation seeks to have a teacher of information and a preacher of transformation. Transformation should be primary in nature for the marital health within a congregation. To ignore a community-based, transformational spiritual formation is to grieve and quench the Spirit of God and to ultimately disrupt the harmony of marriages in the local church context (Bloesch 1998, 84). An imbalance between information and transformation from the preached Word and discipleship results in legalism and rigidity. A balanced perspective with rightly fixed end goals lends itself to marriages that exhibit healthy truth and grace.

### *Theology of the Pastoral Role*

Pastors have a tremendous responsibility regarding the relational health within the church. This can be especially true for marital health. The pastoral roles of teacher, model, and mediator contribute to the health of congregational marriages. If pastors are not relationally healthy, then the church's opportunity for growth and success are impacted. The functions of the shepherd of the church are aided by the ability to exercise self-awareness and social awareness (Boyatzis, Goleman and Mckee 2002, 39). With this maturity and development, the pastor's biblical depth will inform teaching, modeling, and mediation. When these are lacking, the church begins to respond with unhealthy behavior. The warnings to the seven churches in Revelation give us an indication of the impact of relational harmony and its connection to leadership influence (Revelation 2-4). The church at Corinth was also impacted relationally by leaders who were teaching and modeling bad behavior and disrupting the balance of the

community (I Corinthians 1:10-17; 11:18-19; II Corinthians 11:4). Therefore, pastoral couples carry a critical role in this matter.

It is important to note that the pastoral role may be handled by more than just an official Pastor. Each church sets up a culturally appropriate leadership structure, which, when administered properly, enables care and shepherding of the people to occur. Particular structures must take into account tradition that may move pastors from one community of believers to another (Grenz 1994, 560-561). In this case, stability of marital health falls not only to the pastor as interim but, in large part, to the influence of the laity.

A pastor's role may be fulfilled through the functions of the office, namely, preaching, teaching, leading worship, and evangelism; but the ultimate call of this role is to prepare God's people for works of service (Ephesians 4:12) (Grenz 1994, 563). In so doing, the pastor helps to shape the relational health of the congregation so that the people of a particular fellowship, most of whom are married, are effective in their call to do works of service. Stanley Grenz summarizes this well when he states, "Fundamentally, the pastoral office is to facilitate the well-functioning of the community. To this end, the pastor keeps before the members the vision of the community ideal, the design of God toward which the local fellowship directs its energies" (Grenz 1994, 563). Therefore, the health of congregational marriages are directly influenced by the pastoral office.

As we have discussed, the church's functions serve as signposts of a theology of relational harmony, and specifically, as it pertains to marital health. Before we leave the theological area of ecclesiology, we will explore two more

ecclesiological signs of relational harmony: the priesthood of the believer and the nature of ecclesial unity.

### *The Priesthood of the Believer*

While it may be true that the pastoral role has a tremendous amount of influence on marital health as a function of the church, the priesthood of the believer extends responsibility beyond a single individual. The priesthood of the believer is the believer's role, right, and responsibility within the context of the Communion of the Saints. All who are followers of Christ have been designated as priests. As a result, all have the opportunity to access God through the one mediator Jesus Christ (Bloesch 1998, 105-107). This priesthood is shared by all believers (Grenz 1994, 466).

Practically, the role of priest for a Christian is seen through active participation using one's gifts, sharing the Word, participation in the sacraments, offering spiritual sacrifice, and intercession for others (Grenz 1994, 555) (Bloesch 1998, 107, 118). Therefore, the role of priest is that of relational responsibility, not just individual exercise. As priests, all members of the body of Christ bear a responsibility to participate fully in worship, edification, and outreach. They are called together to do the business of the church as a group of priestly participants. This becomes a spiritual experience and an opportunity to express healthy marital relationships (Grenz 1994, 556). Furthermore, marriages can be at their healthiest and happiest when Christ following, Spirit-led spouses engage one another as priestly participants.

## Ecclesiological Understanding of Pneumatology

The Trinity is foundational to Christian belief. We worship one God in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each person of the Godhead has a specific role and characteristic. Included in the role of the Holy Spirit is acting as the bond between the Father and the Son. Love is the fundamental essence of this Trinitarian relationship (Grenz 1994, 71-72). Stanley Grenz effectively draws out the implications of this for believers when he writes the following:

At the heart of the Christian understanding of God is the declaration that God is triune – Father, Son, and Spirit. This means that in His eternal essence the one God is a social reality, the social Trinity. Because God is the social Trinity, a plurality in unity, the ideal for humankind does not focus on solitary persons, but on persons-in-community. God intends that we reflect his nature in our lives. This is only possible, however, as we move out of our isolation and into relationships with others. The ethical life, therefore, is the life-in-relationship, or the life-in-community. (Grenz 1994, 76)

Relational Harmony in marriage is modeled for believers in the Trinity. The character of the God who made us in His image is that of unity. Therefore, married Christian couples are called to exhibit this harmonious lifestyle with one another both in action and in our very essence.

The behavior of the church goes beyond ethnology. We have an ever-active God. This activity with the Holy Spirit may take on the form of doctrine, which leads to praxis within community life. It also means we take on the role of submission and engagement with the heart of the Holy Spirit as He speaks and moves (Vanhoozer 2005, 97-98). Recognition of presence is a key characteristic for the fellowship of believers. When the body actively seeks and recognizes the

continual movement of the Holy Spirit, the interpersonal interactions are sharpened and shaped. Therefore, recognition of presence is not static but advocates active body life.

Active body life can be seen within the activity of the Holy Spirit. Erickson reminds us that the Holy Spirit gives life, power, unity, sensitivity to the Lord's leading, guidance into truth, gifts to serve, purity and holiness (Erickson 1996, 1039-1041). As the Holy Spirit imparts these gifts, we respond in community life and, specifically, in the life of Christian marriage. Each activity of the Spirit breathes health and life into marriages. Without our submission to and engagement with the working of the Holy Spirit, couples are dysfunctional.

Therefore, due to the relational nature of God, the engaging role of the Holy Spirit, and our active response to the movement of the Spirit, we can expect marriages within the church to have a need for, and growth in, relational health and harmony. A pneumatological understanding is only a portion of a theological approach to marital health in the local church context. There also must be a discussion of soteriology, which includes a clarity on the human condition.

### Ecclesiological Understanding of Soteriology

Our doctrine of the human constitution relates to human interaction. Erickson offers five primary reasons to seek understanding of the doctrine on the human constitution. This doctrine is important because of its interrelatedness to other doctrines, its intersection between the Bible and humans, its importance to other disciplines in the intellectual world, the increased interest and confusion as to "what is man?" and its impact on practical theology (Erickson 1996, 456-462).

When we comprehend our constitution, we can better understand ourselves and our relationship to one another in marriage.

We are the created of God. We are each created as diverse beings but remain unified as one. Erickson offers an understanding of our human constitution as “conditional unity” (Erickson 1996, 536-439). Our present state is temporary, and we will be complete at the resurrection. We are affected in every aspect of our lives by the curse of sin. Therefore, our redemption is necessary for relational wholeness within marriage.

### *Sin and Redemption*

We are social beings and created for social interaction (Erickson 1996, 470). Sin does not stand alone as just failure, falling short, or missing the mark. It also entails a disruption of community, both with God and with others (Grenz 1994, 186-187). Sin within the world directly affects our relationships with others through self-centered competition, the inability or desire to empathize with others, the rejection and disrespect of authority, and the inability to love others (Erickson 1996, 618-619). These are all marks of the influence of sin on marriages.

Therefore, God interceded in the world to redeem corrupted creation. This redemptive work through Jesus Christ united us to God and with one another. Specifically, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ provides an opportunity for the unity of all who are believers in Him, both in spiritual reality and practice (Oden 1998, 211).

We have been afforded the regeneration and sanctification of our lives. Regeneration in a social context can be understood as the renewal of individuals

who have been affected by sin. In this renewal process, marriages and communities at large are transformed (Erickson 1996, 655-656). Sanctification draws us into a holy existence that can only come through the Author of life. It is a progressive, continuing work as a result of unremitting grace, which enables believers to mature in the faith (Oden 1998, 213). We are living out and growing in the redemptive process on a daily basis. We are empowered by the Spirit for “Christ-likeness and service to God” (Grenz 1994, 440). God has transformed us and “engrafted [us] into His righteousness” (Bloesch 1998, 41-42). Sanctification is both spiritual wellness and moral goodness. It is being made holy (Erickson 1996, 967-968). Sanctification brings about marriages that are “set apart.”

Vanhoozer describes sanctification as becoming “spiritually fit,” much like an athlete would want to be attentive to attitude and conduct to maximize opportunities on the field of competition (Vanhoozer 2005, 373). Therefore, we are running before a great cloud of witnesses, and we are participating alongside a great host of fellow competitors (Hebrews 12:1). In marriage, the primary fellow competitor is one’s spouse. Jesus’ regenerating and sanctifying work has enabled us to be free from the effects of sin, individually and socially. In this life, the power of Christ moves spouses from opposing to partnering competitors. Holiness is the fruit of redemption, which is regenerating and sanctifying the marriages of repentant people.

Donald Bloesch describes practical holiness as “wounded servanthood, bearing the cross in the midst of the agony of the world” (Bloesch 1998, 53). This is an act of finding perfect grace in the midst of our imperfections. We see purity

and holiness overwhelming us relationally as we choose to serve because we have been served. We choose to love because He has loved us. This is theology through a relational lens.

“Relational theology” is concerned with the effects of sin in interpersonal relationships (Erickson 1996, 889). This view holds that individuals are “deficient” in marriages and that there is a “fundamental lack of harmony” where healthy community should be (Erickson 1996, 889). In light of this view, we can now address marital health as a result of holiness. This is our relationship with one another, set apart as a by-product of the redemptive work of God.

Our relationship with our spouse requires the intercession of the redemptive work of God through Jesus Christ in order for us to experience and share sanctification and holiness. The church offers the best alternative in this world for marital health in light of a clear understanding of relational theology within the framework of soteriology. Further, then, the health of relationships, and specifically marriages, within the church is influenced by the regenerating and sanctifying work God has done for His people as we seek to live out redemptive relationships.

### Summary

We have discovered that a proper theological understanding of ecclesiology, soteriology, and pneumatology is necessary in order to process marital health within the body of Christ. There is a solid theological foundation for the harmony of marriages in the community of Christ. We benefit from a proper

understanding of relational health and vibrancy. Christians should practice an informed faith as they express relational holiness with God and with their spouse. This is a practice for today and a practical theology throughout church history. Our rich heritage in marital health and redemptive marital relationships is where we turn our attention now. Specifically, we turn to the theological understanding and biblical practice of the Evangelical Friends Church, also known as Quakers.

### **Historical Foundation**

The Word of God is our primary rule for faith and practice. Theology is our understanding of God based on the Scriptures. History is the gift of lived-out faith and understanding with the guidance of the Holy Spirit over time. The Word, theology, and history lay a foundation for our understanding of relational health in the marital context. I have explored two of these three. I will conclude this chapter by briefly examining the historical foundation for marital harmony within the movement of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

### **Models of Redemptive Relationship**

George Fox was the founder of the Society of Friends, or Quakers, of which Orange Friends Church is affiliated. He lived much of his life as a single man who was focused on sharing the gospel, and he would not marry until he reached his mid-forties. It was at that time that he married Margaret Fell, who, being in her fifties, had been widowed for several years. Margaret had already been active in the Quaker movement, and, after marrying George, she continued

as a partner in ministry, becoming known as the mother of the Friends movement (Williams 1962, 48-51).

George and Margaret Fell Fox led by example. They believed firmly in the message they were carrying and the movement they were leading. They endured hardship and rejoiced in victories for the sake of Christ. They also enjoyed simple days in the company of one another (Williams 1962, 51). They lived out their married life in community. This is the historical foundation for a theology of marriage for the Friends Church. This is a foundation of simple-yet-profound love, commitment, and community based accountability. This is a commitment to the call of Christ and to the marriage partnership, the result of which is a legacy of relational harmony through redemptive relationships in community.

This reminds me of the partnership mentioned in the book of Acts between Priscilla and Aquila. In Acts 18 we learn that this married couple, who were Christ-followers, were also business partners. They supported the ministry of Paul, and they participated in teaching and evangelism (Acts 18:2, 18, 26). From a historical perspective, many married couples between the time of Priscilla and Aquila and the time of George and Margaret Fox are models for relational health and ministry impact simultaneously. It is with this understanding that we can affirm that two are better than one. Furthermore, we add that two together in relational health are better than two at odds in relational dysfunction. This can be especially true for a couple who has a unified focus on living for and worshipping God.

### *Simple Worship, Simple Weddings*

Worship in the Quaker tradition is simple. Although not the specific practice of most Friends Churches today, silent worship – worship based on “Holy Obedience” – is a practical application of the overarching theology of simplicity (Trueblood 1966, 88). This historically held theology impacts every area of faith and practice including special ceremonies, like weddings, and special relationships, like marriages.

Quakers were married in community without clergy participation, instead having the community “officiating” and affirming the union of the man and woman. The lack of need for an officiant or pastor to declare them wed was felt due to the firm belief that God joins two together in marriage, not man (Trueblood 1966, 102-103). The marriage relationship was so valued by the community that a simple ceremony affirmed the importance of relational health lived in the context of an accountable, Spirit-led body of believers:

The characteristic Quaker wedding is a thing of simple beauty. The philosophy is that, since the parties engaging in marriage are entering into a deep sacred commitment, which involved others as well as themselves, private marriage is always a contradiction in terms. (Trueblood 1966, 102)

Therefore, marriage ceremony worship services would include an intentionally simple ceremony with much silence, some open sharing, and the signing and reading of the marriage certificate. Vows exchanged would be simple and brief (Comfort 1945, 33).

Historically, Quaker marriage might have been simple, but it did not lack deliberate preparation. The process for coming together as a married couple was, at times, a consuming, tedious affair for the community of believers.

Particularly, the waiting period allotted for preparation through the investigation of the faith and practice of the intended man and woman was extensive and thorough (Barbour and Frost 1988, 113). Marriage often occurred for early Friends with individuals that knew each other decently well. The couple grew up together, or in the same social circle, due to the isolation of the Quaker community from other faith backgrounds (Barbour and Frost 1988, 114).

As a result, Friends rarely were divorced, according to historian William W. Comfort. Lower than normal divorce rates were attributed to the process of marriage preparation and ceremony. Community based betrothal was rooted in accountability. The bride and groom would be assigned two men and two women to assist in godly premarital council and preparation (Comfort 1945, 33). Marriage was always a community affair involving both sets of parents, respected older members – known as “Weighty Friends” – and the community of believers as a whole (Barbour and Frost 1988, 112). Traditional Quaker marriage only necessitated affirmation from the home congregation of each party and public proclamation before the body of believers. This deliberate practice allowed for trustworthy connections between families and congregations, which led to reliable bonds in marriage focused upon unity, harmony, peace, and godly productivity.

### *Peace and Justice Testimony*

Another historical attribute that impacts the foundational stance for relationship health is the Quaker testimony on peace and justice. This attribute has been present since the founding of the movement (Trueblood 1966, 187).

Primarily, the value placed on peace has played out in the call for the abolition of war, and the value placed on justice has been active in the abolition of slavery.

The heart of the matter for this testimony has always been a call for the practice of relational health through peaceful resolution, conflict management, and the fair treatment of all. George Fox wrote in response to challengers of the testimony on peace:

Our principle is and our practices have always been to seek peace and ensue it and to follow after righteousness and the knowledge of God, seeking the good and welfare and doing that which tends to the peace of all. (Vipont 1977, 81)

Therefore, the application of a peace testimony has been at work amidst conflict between nations as well as familial relationships. Quaker marriages have benefitted greatly from a strong peace testimony.

The famous Quaker abolitionist, John Woolman, was steadfast in his labor to seek justice for the enslaved. His work included a testimony which emphasized the value of marriage between the enslaved. He wrote emphatically that slaves who were married should not be separated from one another. He further called for the recognition of slave marriages (Woolman 1961, 58-59). This heart to obtain justice for the enslaved was a reflection of Quakers' belief in the value and sanctity of all marriages.

The testimony for peace and justice was not just in the public arena, nor was it applied merely to cultural injustices. It was appropriately applied in the home, as well. In *The Quakers*, Hugh Barbour and William Frost recount, "Friends wanted marriage for love, but love was defined as stemming from a

spiritual harmony between the persons and resting upon similarities in religious feelings, outward temperament, and class” (Barbour and Frost 1988, 112). With a firm foundation of inward spirituality and a strong public testimony for peace and justice, early Quakers pursued a domestic life that would complement their convictions, rather than contradict them.

*Egalitarian Relationships: Women in Ministry, Men in Spiritual Need*

Quaker egalitarianism in the past has set the standard for relational harmony in the context of redemptive relationships. The view of the equality of both genders was expressed in several ways: the vocational ministry call of women, men being supported spiritually by their spouses, and legal and domestic shared responsibilities. All three of these areas were counter-cultural, yet each contributed positively towards marital harmony.

In the Colonial era, Quaker women of the United Kingdom, including its American colonies, usually married in their mid-twenties. This represented a delay for that time period when compared to non-Quaker women. This delay in marriage is thought to be connected to the call to ministry, which became a preferred path over marriage for some women (Larson 1999, 135). Men were also called to vocational ministry, but the openness of the Society of Friends to send women was an indication of the movements’ valuation of each person, regardless of gender.

Furthermore, the traditional Quaker marriage in the 18<sup>th</sup> century had a hierarchal structure with God at the pinnacle and the husband and wife as equals. Spouses were considered equally able to hear from God and equally

accountable to respond in obedience. In fact, even if the husband objected to a particular call, a woman, with the approval of the monthly meeting, could respond to this call as she wished (Larson 1999, 143). Often, spouses would not object to the call of the other, which further emphasized a mutual support for the sake of spiritual matters. Therefore, one spouse would serve and sacrifice for the other so they could maximize who they had been called to be in Christ Jesus. In addition, healthy growth toward being one unit, rather than two separate entities who act as individuals, would be achieved for the furthering of the work of the Lord. Although not all early Quaker marriages conformed to this ideal, many were models of harmonious, redemptive relationships that, as a result, blessed many others.

On many occasions, marriage was a spiritual encouragement and accountability for individuals. In fact, with the Quaker movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, some young men would marry older women, which would greatly impact the men's spiritual devotion. Two specific cases include twenty-three-year-old Samuel Fothergill, who married thirty-eight-year-old Susanna Croudson, and twenty-eight-year-old Samuel Neale, who married forty-year-old Mary Peisley (Larson 1999, 138). Both of these instances illustrate the tendency of some more mature women to marry younger men. This was beneficial to the latter's spiritual welfare. Historian Rebecca Larson states, "Quaker marriage was a spiritual union, not merely procreative, as spouses assisted each other's religious growth" (Larson 1999, 170). It was no doubt helpful to have the movement's founder, George Fox, setting a precedent of acceptability by marrying a woman older than

him when he wed the widow Margaret Fell (Larson 1999, 138). Although this marital arrangement was not due to the spiritual immaturity of Fox, we have a clear record of mutual benefit for the spiritual growth of this couple.

The practice of gender equality was the context for marital harmony for early Quakers. Redemptive relationships that were fleshed out allowed women to be involved with vocational ministry and have spiritual influence on men. Yet there is one more way that equality was exhibited in the Religious Society of Friends. When it came to domestic responsibilities and domestic legal matters, Friends history is on the side of shared responsibility and privilege. Quakers practiced marital health through breaking cultural norms concerning legal matters. For instance, wives were often included in family business and named beneficiaries in wills as a matter of equality before God (Larson 1999, 151-152).

In addition to legal issues, husbands and wives shared the role of “household priest” in spiritually nurturing their children (Larson 1999, 167). Once again, the Society’s founders, Fox and Fell, “[began] with new religious insights and an impoverished laity, [and] they ended by forming a religious people distinguished by egalitarian, loving relationships and morally self-sufficient households” (Levy 1988, 53). An example from more recent history of this very principle of Quakerism includes Walter and Emma Malone. They were an example of an early twentieth-century couple that partnered in ministry in an egalitarian way. Although Walter worked a successful stone business and Emma raised children and managed the household, they both ministered to many people. This was especially so with young people pursuing ministry preparation

at the Cleveland Bible Institute, which they had founded, and which is now known as Malone University (Malone 1993, 71-72).

Valuing one another is a key hallmark to healthy relationships. Egalitarianism has been modeled historically in the Friends church through women in ministry, mutual spiritual encouragement among spouses, and shared domestic legal rights and familial responsibilities. Therefore, equality is a value that contributes to the foundation of relational health for marriages within the Friends movement.

### Summary

Marriage health and vitality have long been valued by the people called Quakers. These followers of Christ have sought a genuine and direct experience with the living Christ, and, as a result of this personal encounter with God, Friends have been a people who have sought to live out a primitive Christianity in faith and practice. In so doing, these people of simple faith have shown the value of relational harmony with all, especially within the marriage unit. In summary, Quakers have had healthy models, like George and Margaret Fell Fox. Quakers have focused on simple, yet profound community based, Christ-centered marital unions. Quakers have given a historic peace and justice testimony. Quakers have valued all people as creations of the Almighty God. Quakers have inherited a rich tradition of relational harmony.

The church should be a source and guide, pointing toward strong and healthy marriage. I have shown the biblical, theological, and historical foundations that advocate and support marital health within the church. These

foundations lead to contemporary voices that further reinforce the need for and impact of redemptive marital relationships in the local church context. The next chapter will include such contemporary perspectives.

## CHAPTER THREE

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Marriage has been established by God, supported by the Church, and celebrated, yet mishandled by our contemporary culture. The Church holds a unique position in helping the contemporary culture properly value marriage through the advocacy of marital health. Therefore, the purpose of this project was to impact the relationship health of participating married couples at Orange Friends Church through the Prepare-Enrich Group Program. The research question was: To what extent does the Prepare-Enrich Group Program impact the relationship health of select married couples at Orange Friends Church? Through this project the unique position of the church is being explored and modeled. Specifically, the churches use of the Prepare Enrich Group Program demonstrates advocacy and impact. The greater the active advocacy through ministry investment, the greater the impact will be on the marriages within our culture.

Chapter one introduced the project with an overview and Chapter two unpacked the biblical, theological, and historical foundations for this project. This chapter will concisely deal with the contemporary foundations of marital health impact within our culture. First, we will explore positive and negative trends along with the value of marriage for individuals, families and communities. Then, we will shed light on contemporary efforts on helping marriages survive and thrive. With the background of the value of marriage and work being done to impact these relationships, this chapter will explore types of couples and effective models and

best practices that are being implemented within marriage initiatives. We will conclude with a summary of the model used for this specific project. Through the discussion of the Prepare Enrich model and implementation, we will conclude with church specific application and assessment.

### **Field of Study**

We were created to be in relationship. Genesis 2:18 states that it is not good for us to be alone. Our culture recognizes the value of relationships. Although this may be true, people struggle to maintain healthy marriages. With this in mind, we will explore this field of study by defining marriage. This definition and clarification will include dealing with major themes of marriage health, marriage ministry, and marriage initiative, both formal and informal. We will also explore themes and trends of positive and negative impact. Once we have an understanding of marriage, we will ask: What is the present status of marriage in the North American context? Why is marriage important to individuals, children, and communities? What are efforts in our culture towards marriage health? What efforts are being made in the church context toward healthier marriages?

### **Marriage Defined**

In her seminal work on the history of marriage, Stephanie Coontz offers that some have defined marriage as a couple who shares economically and sexually in a cohabitive arrangement, others have tied the definition directly to legal union which leads to "legitimized" childbearing, while still others place the weight of the definition upon the shoulders of the societal context and their

approval of the union for sexual intercourse and child bearing. In addition, many anthropologists simply take a functional definition of marriage. This view seems to focus almost exclusively on the each person's utility or division of labor which elevates complementarian behaviors as the ultimate ingredient to an official union (Coontz 2005, 26-28). While this provides a definition from a social scientific perspective, a definition through a theological lens will provide a fuller understanding.

Pastor and author, Tim Keller, and his wife Kathy, wrote *The Meaning of Marriage* as an encouraging voice for the church and beyond in regards to healthy marriage. They remind us that the Bible begins with the marriage of Adam and Eve and ends with the wedding of Christ and the Church. Marriage is God's idea and a cultural institution; in addition, "what the Bible says about God's design for marriage is crucial." (Keller and Keller 2011, 13). Furthermore, the Keller's describe the negative views and definitions of marriage as "originally about property and is now in flux, marriage crushes individual identity and has been oppressive for women, marriage stifles passion and is ill-fitted to psychological reality, marriage is "just a piece of paper that only serves to complicate love, . . ." (Keller and Keller 2011, 11). In reality, marriage is meant to provide "a way for two spiritual friends to help each other on their journey to become the persons God designed them to be" (Keller and Keller 2011, 15-16). In simplest terms, it is the formalized union of "a lifelong, monogamous relationship between a man and a woman" (Keller and Keller 2011, 15-16).

While these definitions offer clarity as to what marriage is, they do not define the health status of marriage. Furthermore, the definition calls for an understanding of health status. Marriages are not neutral. They all are on a continuum from unhealthy to healthy. Individual marriages all contribute to the overall health status of marriage within a given culture.

### *Contemporary Marriage Status*

Marriage in America is an institution of both high regard and abuse. Americans are more likely to disagree that “marriage is outdated” (Cherlin 2009, 16-19, 28). Americans marry sooner than most other Western nations (mid-twenties). More Americans marry than anywhere else in the West (Cherlin 2009, 16-19, 28). Yet, Americans experience a greater amount of divorce. Therefore, American children are more likely to see their parents split (Cherlin 2009, 16-19, 28). Americans are more likely to re-partner within three years of splitting up. Further emphasizing our felt-need to be in a marital union or cohabitative relationship (Cherlin 2009, 16-19, 28). These are but a few facts that remind us of the value and devaluing of marriage in the United States over the most recent years.

Sociologist Andrew Cherlin claims that there is a great tension in the United States that is unique in the world. America values marriage highly, yet we value individualism. This is what he calls the “marriage-go-round” (Cherlin 2009, 9). Tim Keller states that the greatest enemy of marriage is "sinful self-centeredness" (Keller and Keller 2011, 15). These two values are at odds with one another. Elevating self in a formalized union of "a lifelong, monogamous

relationship between a man and a woman" directly impacts the health status of the marriage and of the marriage culture at large (Keller and Keller 2011, 15-16).

Sociologists Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher write of the great "postmodern myths" about marriage (Gallagher and Waite 2000, 4-6). These myths spring from our contradictory values of marriage and individualism. Waite and Gallagher state that the lies our culture embrace include the belief that marriage is "oppressive to women," that it is "largely a private matter," and that "divorce is best to protect children" (Gallagher and Waite 2000, 4-6). They claim that the most damaging myth is that unhealthy marriages and divorce have little to no consequences for those outside of the couple themselves (Gallagher and Waite 2000, 4-6). Our culture desires for a perfect marriage, but we exhibit a misunderstanding and ignorance of the means necessary for healthy, long lasting marriage. Scholar Glenn Stanton concludes that marriage is broken due in large part to the lack of definitive identifying traits. Furthermore, the definition of healthy family relationships is too broad, inclusive, or misunderstood (Stanton 1997, 18). This redefinition would include the threat of the legalization and promotion of gay-marriage which greatly hinders the churches and marriage ministries ability to help those in natural marriages due to accusations of hate speech (Maier and Stanton 2004, 92). These myths, misunderstandings, and ignorance's have led to unhealthy practices. These unhealthy practices have resulted in negative trends on the marriage landscape.

## The negative trends for contemporary marriage

One of the primary negative trends in marital relationships is a high divorce rate. In 2002 the divorce rate was more than twice that of 1960, but it had declined slightly since hitting the highest point in American history in the early 1980's (Popenoe and Whitehead 2002, 20). Although the trend is not sharply increasing, views and expectations of young people remain pessimistic. One recent poll of high school seniors found that "nearly half of boys and over a third of girls did not expect to remain married to the same person" throughout their life (Carroll, Hymowitz, Kaye, and Wilcox 2013, 24). Furthermore, higher divorce rates are being fueled by self-interest and the lack of confidence in marital unions' ability to meet personal needs. Divorce that is justified through the need fulfillment and personal development of the individual has become known as "Expressive Divorce" (Whitehead 2001, 6-16).

Therefore, pessimistic views of the value of marriage and self-interest are negative trends that are closely related to the divorce rate. "[I]n 1960, about 75 percent of adult were married. . . . In 2011, fewer than 50 percent of households were . . . married couples" (Schulz 2013, 10). Furthermore, ". . . in 1960 almost 70 percent of adults ages 20 to 29 were married . . ." compared to about 25 percent by 2011 (Schulz 2013, 13). These stats further show what policy analyst Ryan Streeter claims to be a "huge shift in moral understanding of the good life in America" Schulz 2013, 13). The traditional understanding of the steps towards full adulthood of education, marriage, and parenthood are no longer considered the ideal.

In 2013, The National Marriage Project reported on the low view of young adults in regards to marriage:

Culturally, young adults have increasingly come to see marriage as a “capstone” rather than a “cornerstone”—that is, something they do after they have all their other ducks in a row, rather than a foundation for launching into adulthood and parenthood. But this capstone model is not working well for Middle Americans. One widely discussed reason for this is that Middle American men are having difficulty finding decent paying, stable work capable of supporting a family. Another less understood reason is that the capstone model is silent about the connection between marriage and childbearing. (Carroll, Hymowitz, Kaye, and Wilcox 2013, 4)

In 2002, The National Marriage Project found that “Americans have become less likely to marry, and that fewer of those who do marry have marriages they consider to be very happy” (Popenoe and Whitehead 2002, 18). This same study found that “teen attitudes . . . [indicate] a growing disparity. The desire of teenagers for a long-term marriage has increased, [but they] have become more pessimistic about ever being able to have such a marriage” (Popenoe and Whitehead 2002, 30). The 2013 study further found that most women without a college degree continue to experience “love and babies” in their early twenties without the benefit of marriage (Carroll, Hymowitz, Kaye, and Wilcox 2013, 29). To further clarify, “. . . for Middle Americans, delayed marriage is not a sign of indifference to family life, but a sign that marriage is losing much of its institutional purpose” (Carroll, Hymowitz, Kaye, and Wilcox 2013, 29). Without the institutional purpose, there remains a lack of “sign post” or markers that can be so important in our development as individuals and as a culture (Carroll, Hymowitz, Kaye, and Wilcox 2013, 37). Likewise, sociologists have reiterated the negative effect of extended adolescent development on marriage wellness and

attitude (Schulz 2013, 33). Many in our culture, particularly young people, are asking, *Why Marry?*

The growing trend of pessimism and the reality of self-interest contributes to the increased practice of premarital cohabitation. One study showed that cohabitation increased 550 percent between the years of 1970 and 1994 (Stanton 1997, 20-24). Since 1994, permissive attitudes towards the practice of cohabitation have risen while the number of couples living together has doubled (Stanton 2011, 11). In fact, Stanton claims that this attitude and trend has been traced to a sexual revolution that finds its roots in the nineteenth century and came to full light in the 1960's (Stanton 1997, 33-37). In a 2002 study, men were found to remain single longer since cohabitive relationships offer an unfettered lifestyle with many of the benefits of marriage, including sexual fulfillment (Popenoe and Whitehead 2002, 6). Yet, sociologist and marriage experts find that cohabitation is not as beneficial as it may seem to some.

Research scholar, Glenn Stanton and others warn that cohabitation exhibits a "lack of commitment and teaches unhealthy relationship skills" that directly impact the health of marriages in our culture (Stanton 2011, 65-66; Harris and Pollard 2013, 11). Stanton further reinforces these findings when he states:

Premarital cohabitation creates more broken and painful relationships, is associated with more conflict and violence in the home, and leads to increased infidelity, less psychological well-being, and less equality in the domestic lives of men and women. Clearly, it is no alternative to marriage, which...has no peer among alternative domestic configurations in providing for the health and well-being of adults. (Stanton 1997, 70)

Psychologists Scott Stanley and Galena Rhoades, add that marriages that form out of cohabitating relationships are in danger because they are often a result of “sliding” into the living arrangement and marital union, rather than “deciding” to take positive and beneficial steps (Markman, Rhoades, and Stanley 2006, 499). A lack of “clear expectations, common values, or a shared commitment to one another” mark the unhealthy nature of a cohabitating couple (Markman, Rhoades, and Stanley 2006, 499). Couples that slide through the practice of cohabitation are more likely to divorce. According to the findings of Stanley and Rhoades, couples who cohabit before engagement are more likely to get divorced after marriage (Markman, Rhoades, and Stanley 2006, 499). Those who choose to wait to live together until after the wedding day, not only have much higher success rates, but indicate higher commitment, satisfaction, and quality within their marriage (Markman, Rhoades, and Stanley 2006, 499). Marriage health has suffered due to the negative trend of living together before the wedding day.

The positive trends for contemporary marriage

Despite the negative trends, marriage health has a brighter side as well. Sociologist Andrew Cherlin wrote of North American cultural respect for marriage when he states, we have a “marriage culture” (Cherlin 2009, 25). He claims that Americans are more likely to say that “marriage is a given,” “marriage is forever,” “divorce is a last resort,” and “marriage continues to be the most desired and most prestigious way to have a family” (Cherlin 2009, 25). Marriage is still the gold standard and cultural status symbol. Nothing in our culture is close to

marriage as the social ideal (Cherlin 2009, 139-140). Family life scholar and historian, Stephanie Coontz, wrote that in recent decades ". . . marriage has steadily become more fair, more fulfilling, and more effective in fostering the well-being of both adults and children than ever before in history" (Coontz 2005, 301). This is partially due to the phenomenon of delayed marriage, which elevates the socio-economic level of women, aids in goal achievement for women, and reduces the divorce rate (Carroll, Hymowitz, Kaye, and Wilcox 2013, 3). The value of healthy marriage dominates our culture as a purposefully delayed capstone, rather than a presumed rushed cultural institution. Although some research has shown benefits in delaying marriage into one's thirties, others are finding through comparative studies that those married in their mid-twenties indicate high levels of health and satisfaction (Carroll, Hymowitz, Kaye, and Wilcox 2013, 20-21). Couples married between the ages of 22-25 seem to have better sex, possess a stronger shared faith, and enjoy the value of family traditions. All of these traits point to healthy marriage. Furthermore, the economic stability offered by delaying marriage may not provide a satisfactory trade-off for the emotional and social stability that is found in earlier marriages. The National Marriage Project has concluded that men and women in their mid-twenties who are in stable marriages drink less alcohol, suffer from less depression, and experience higher levels of satisfaction in life (Carroll, Hymowitz, Kaye, and Wilcox 2013, 20-21). Whether entered into in the third or fourth decade of life, or beyond, healthy marriages make a positive difference. The cultural trend

continues to be that of valuing the impact of healthy marriage both personally and corporately.

*Why is marriage important?*

Healthy marriage positively impacts individuals, families, communities, and the overall culture. Gary Stanton has done extensive research on marriage and family for the cultural engagement wing of Focus on the Family. Stanton states that:

First-time, lifelong, monogamous marriage is the relationship that best provides for the most favorable exercise of human sexuality, the overall well-being of adults, and the proper socialization of children. Marriage has no close rival. It stands independently above any other option: singleness, cohabitation, divorce, and remarriage. (Stanton 1997, 11)

The influence of healthy marriage cannot be overlooked. Individually, healthy marriage shows real and measurable results as it serves as a "protection/support" for those that enter into this permanent relationship (Stanton 1997, 74). Furthermore, the individual in a marital union experience physical, emotional, and social benefits. In fact, in their book, *The Case for Marriage*, Maggi Gallagher and Linda Waite claim that "not being married can be hazardous to your health" (Gallagher and Waite 2000, 47).

Marriage is beneficial for individuals. Being married means a longer life span. Studies show that married men live as much as ten years longer (Gallagher and Waite 2000, 48). Not only are they living longer, but they also experience better than average health (Gallagher and Waite 2000, 49). Gallagher and Waite conclude that the evidence clearly shows that "marriage itself gives men and women healthier and longer lives" (Gallagher and Waite 2000, 52).

According to the Centers for Disease Control, divorced individuals are three times as likely to commit suicide as those who are married (Stanton 1997, 79). The lowest rates of mental illness are among the married/never divorced. In fact, the lowest levels for those who experience depression are those who are first-time, never separated marrieds (Stanton 1997, 86-87). In addition, stable marriages show the lowest levels of alcoholism. In fact, a study done at Stanford University showed married alcoholics "reported lower levels of depression and anxiety, had higher scores on tests of psychological well-being and self-confidence, and reported less physical discomfort in the midst of their alcoholism. . . ." (Stanton 1997, 77).

Marriage is good for our social lives. It serves the important role as an "enforceable trust" (Cherlin 2009, 138). That is, it is a public commitment in which couples are held accountable. Individuals tend to behave differently based on a formal and informal social accountable structure. For instance, in one study men who had never married had some of the lowest levels of personal income. Marriage instills a "responsibility ethic" (Carroll, Hymowitz, Kaye, and Wilcox 2013, 22). This ethical response in the context of an accountable relationship associated with marriage makes men smarter, work harder, and better-paid workers (Carroll, Hymowitz, Kaye, and Wilcox 2013, 22). Therefore, healthy marriage creates an environment in which individuals can thrive socially.

Social health is not just limited to the individual. Social health can be experienced in families: particularly the couple unit and with children. For instance, first time married relationships indicate higher levels of physical and

emotional satisfaction with sex (Laumann, Michael, Michaels 1994, 364). The satisfaction measurements are not only applicable to intimacy. Marriage is an optimal context for personal need fulfillment. Moreover, companionship is one of the primary needs to be met in the lives of individuals (Stanton 2011, 25-26).

Children experience a great extent of benefit from parents with healthy marriages. Negative effects of divorce include “parental absence, parental adjustment to divorce, inter-parental conflict, economic hardship, and life stress” (Stanton 1997, 141-142). The inverse is also true. Healthy marriages offer children parental presence, personal and financial stability, a model for healthy conflict management, and a decrease in extraordinary stress. Family life economist, Nick Schulz, takes a stand for the children of our culture when he states:

The best and strongest "intervention" a child can receive from the crucial ages of birth to five will come from attentive, loving, biological parents. If that is absent, there may be significant limits to what public policy can achieve and we should not pretend otherwise. Character underlies the internal determinants and controls of thought, conduct, and habit. The need to reinforce empathy and self-control among the young and adolescent is persistent and relentless. While there are other institutions that help in this process-- schools, churches, sports teams, and more-- the family is the first of these and the most influential. (Schulz 2013, 80, 94-95)

Schulz rightly, and clearly, calls to the essential nature of healthy marriage for children. Healthy marriages influence the rearing of healthy children. Healthy children grow up to create healthy marriages. This important cycle continues through each generation and speaks health and vitality to each cultural context.

Therefore, marriage impacts the greater community and culture. Schulz concludes in his finding for the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy

Research that "the collapse of the intact family is one of the most significant economic impacts of our time," in fact, "[the intact family] may be more important than ever" (Schulz 2013, 3). Journalist Nicholas Kristof states, "Over time, my reporting on poverty has led me [to believe that] solid marriages have a huge beneficial impact on the lives of the poor" (Kristof 2012). Nick Schulz agreed when he listed graduating high school, having a steady job, and waiting to have a baby until after marriage as the primary indicators for economic survival (Schulz 2013, 39). Marriage provides an essential point of stability within the community and larger culture. Marital unions serve as the foundation for family planning and economic stability. As our children and economic stability go, so does our culture. Neglected children and families in poverty impact the entire community. Marriages provide the fertile ground for communities to thrive. In addition, Schulz focuses on the importance of church health when he correlates it with marriage health by stating, "Organized religions place a heavy emphasis on the importance and sanctity of marriage and family life, and the decline of religiosity has likely corresponded to a weakening in the family" (Schulz 2013, 33). Healthy marriages aid in the health of the local church. The opposite holds true as well. Healthy faith communities aid in the vitality of marriages within those congregations.

Why is marriage important? Healthy marriages make a difference with individuals, with families, and with communities. Individuals experience greater emotional, physical, and social health. The marital unit and children are better off

economically and socially. Churches enjoy greater relational health. The culture at large enjoys stability, strength, and growth. Marriage is important.

### *Marriage Initiative and Field Components*

Churches, government agencies, and civic groups have long seen the value of healthy marriages. In fact, in 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan published a report called "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" for the Lyndon B. Johnson White House (Cherlin 2009, 125). This report remains one of the most influential and controversial reports on the state of marriage in the United States. Moynihan's report carries relevant truths for all races in our contemporary society (Cherlin 2009, 125). In short, Moynihan concluded that the fragility and disintegration of the modern marital union carries devastating consequences for our nation. From this report and others, initiatives have been implemented by the government with the hope of healthier marriages. This in turn would impact children, economics, crime rates, education, and potential social ills. Public policy expert's proposals have included a tax on divorce, a forced waiting period for divorce ("The Second Chances Act"), marriage education, and preparation programs (Schulz 2013, 80-81, 96-97). These marriage initiatives and more have been introduced as a result of findings like that in the ground breaking Moynihan report. Unfortunately, public policy can only go so far. Schulz states, "[It] may be frustrating for those who see political power as the only tool for addressing problems." But government action can serve as a catalyst for nongovernmental initiative. Schulz further clarifies saying, ". . . another way to look at it is as an opportunity for entrepreneurial social, religious, fraternal, and other organizations

to find new ways to address the problems we are today facing" (Schulz 2013, 80-81, 96-97). Therefore, initiatives taken for greater health in marriages make a difference.

In 2006, the United States congress designated an annual investment of \$150 million for the research and implementation of programs focused on the promotion of healthy marriages (Cherlin 2009, 27). This was called the Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI). "The marriage promotion movement in the early 2000's consisted of a loose group of conservative and centrist activist, religious leaders, academics, and intellectuals who wanted to strengthen the institution of marriage" (Cherlin 2009, 125). Motivation for this movement was a mix between moral and biblical grounds and sociological understandings of healthy family life, particularly for the impact healthy marriages have on children (Cherlin 2009, 125). Some have argued that we have not seen enough change after such a large investment in the HMI to believe that it is working sufficiently. Regardless, this public policy has spurred on entrepreneurial efforts outside of government intervention with some success (Cherlin 2009, 193).

The HMI and other efforts have focused on specific components for maximum impact and influence. The field components for healthy marriage work include marital preparation, education, and intervention. Preparation focuses on relational groundwork for engaged couples. Research indicates that engaged couples who are working through an organized and deliberate process of marriage preparation, whether in a class format, individual counselor, or mentors, are much more successful in long term marriage than those without (Parrott and

Parrott 2011, 57). Couples at any relational stage can benefit from relationship education. Effective programs include the important component of marital education. The reality of marriage includes crisis and conflict. Many couples struggle with unhealthy habits and personal ruts. Intervention is a necessary marital health field component. Effective marriage work includes programmatic efforts at intervening when relational disruption occurs.

### *Marriage Ministry*

It can be said that difficulty in life and in the church are opportunities for discipleship. These are challenges that are not to be avoided or bemoaned; rather, they provide avenues for teaching and guiding people into a deeper relationship with God. Marriage ministry is the deliberate intercession with couples at any phase of their relationship with the expressed purpose of building up redemptive relationships to the glory of God. Marriage ministry advocates, Gary and Aimee Woolverton, define marriage ministry as, “building strong marriages, hence better church growth, through ministry that meets couples where they are in their life stages, and helps them move to deeper relationships with each other, as well as with Jesus Christ” (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 807). As the church works with marriages, the focus remains on transformation through Jesus Christ. Couples are taught to move away from self-centered attitudes and behaviors, or individualism, and to move towards a self-less, God-centered existence. Unfortunately, individualism has been promoted inadvertently by the church in a utilitarian way through the “protestant work ethic” (Cherlin 2009, 28-29). Other times individualism has been developed through the

larger cultural value of self-expression and actualization. Either way, the church has an opportunity and obligation to teach the true gospel of losing oneself, being last, and serving others (Cherlin 2009, 28-29).

Marriage ministry components seek to achieve this gospel-focused mission. Gary and Aimee Woolverton include an exhaustive list of eighteen different components of a healthy marriage ministry in the local church.

Components of ministry to marriages should include:

- Component 1: Activities/Events/Dinners
- Component 2: Communications/Promotion
- Component 3: Covenant Marriage Policy/Program
- Component 4: Growth Groups
- Component 5: Intervention Consultations
- Component 6: Marriage Ministry Policy and Manual
- Component 7: Marriage Preparation
- Component 8: Marriage Resource Center
- Component 9: Mentor Couples
- Component 10: Premarital Counseling
- Component 11: Prayer
- Component 12: Preaching on Marriage
- Component 13: Seminars/Retreats/Getaways
- Component 14: Serving Opportunities
- Component 15: Staff Marriage Enhancement
- Component 16: Support Groups

Component 17: Training/Discipleship Classes

Component 18: Wedding Consultation, Hosting, and Preparation. (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 1801)

While this is a detailed list, the components include key elements to an effective marriage ministry. The critical elements include gospel-centeredness, effectively connecting with all phases of relationships, and an intentionally diverse pedagogy. With this transformational focus, the church is positioned to have a great impact on marriages.

### *Marriage Initiative and Marriage Ministry Comparison*

Healthy marriage initiatives that have been encouraged by legislation and government funding have similarities and differences with church-based marriage ministries. Andrew Cherlin claims that there are two great influencers in American marriages: law and religion. Religion continues to hold an impact on family matters, but this impact, while mostly positive, can have a negative impact encouraging individualistic attitudes (Cherlin 2009, 34). Furthermore, Cherlin calls out the church for strong teachings on self-sufficiency, easy-believism, and individualism. These fight against the necessary components of sacrifice, service, and shared common goals in marriage (Cherlin 2009, 134). Marriage ministry based in the church must be focused on transformational living rather than individualism. The influence of the church on marriages is undeniable and imperative. In fact, the United States stands out from all other western nations as having religion as the primary culture-shaper. Sixty-one percent of Americans say that "the church is giving adequate answers to the problems of family life"

(Cherlin 2009, 104). Therefore, while government sponsored HMI and church sponsored marriage ministries share many of the same field components, interest in all phases of relationships, and expected programmatic outcomes, there remains an important distinctive of gospel-centered transformation within the church.

The church can benefit from adopting best practices used by HMI counterparts and seeking partnership in services where the churches' mission is not compromised. There should not be a great divide between the perceived sacred and secular. The governmental sponsored marriage effort benefits from the involvement of gifted people within the church.

### *Personal Conclusions*

Marriage is a divinely established, socially beneficial institution. Its continued health and vibrancy is essential, yet its troubles are many in our contemporary culture. Many people who are caught up in the challenges of relational crisis or malaise need external intervention. This has happened in recent history through the institutions of the government and of the church. Many of the components and the mission of long lasting healthy marriages are similar, but the ultimate reason behind the work and end goal remains separate. My personal conclusion is that marriage is facing great challenges in our culture. The work of overcoming these challenges is well worth the effort. The church has the message and means for relational health and vibrancy for marriages in this age and beyond. The next section will explore the specific theories and trends that inform the field of marriage ministry in the local church context.

## Theories and Trends

In order to work effectively with marital relationships, the church must understand the different types of couples and how to work with each of the couple types. The following section explores this theory and trend of working with particular couple types in particular ways based on type. In light of this, couples can represent premarital, enrichment, crisis, and remarriage relationships. Although there are common ministry tactics for all marital couples, specific needs are present depending upon the couple's status. Accordingly, approaches include work of preparation, education, inspiration, and intervention. We will explore each of these avenues when dealing with these diverse couple types. First, let us explore the types of couples.

### Types of Couples

Premarital relationships are included in this discussion on marital unions due to their shared foundational nature. Strong marriages start with an understanding of couples before the wedding day. These couples are responding to the prospect of marriage by stating, "What is this all about?" and "This sounds good. I think I'll give it a try" (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 518-521). Once again, this stage of courtship and engagement "is one of the, if not the most, important phases throughout the marriage cycle" (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 603). Couples at this stage are often idealistic and eager to learn and grow in their relationship, yet, the habits, behaviors, and attitudes that can lead to divorce are often present in premarital couples (Blumberg, Markman, and Stanley 2010, 12).

Many married couples would describe their marriage to be at the enrichment phase. Marriages that are at an enrichment phase find their relationship to be anywhere from just below average in health to above average in health. These are couples in process. Pastor and author, Gary Chapman, calls this process the seasons of marriage. He states that much like the seasons of the year, “. . . marriages are constantly changing. Attitudes shift, emotions fluctuate, and the way spouses treat each other ebbs and flows between loving and not so loving” (Chapman 2005, 6). Therefore, the process may be an experience of a difficult time where couples need help from outside their relationship or a time of relational prosperity (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 626, 660). Marriage and family expert, Scott Stanley, observes that most enrichment couples go through similar challenges. Three of these challenges include: minor and major problems that are universal in nature, a positive path of conflict management and communication versus less productive responses to relational challenges, and the attrition that occurs as a result of unhealthy practices over time as a journey towards relational struggle and, perhaps, termination (Blumberg, Markman, and Stanley 2010, 31-33). Most couples exist as this type of marriage for the tenure of the relationship whether struggling or experiencing vibrancy.

Distressed, conflicted, or devitalized couples would reflect what Chapman calls the “winter season” of marriage with conditions of “coldness, harshness, and bitterness” (Chapman 2005, 9). These are couples in crisis. Individuals in distressed relationships begin to seriously question the marriage in which they

are bound or, as Gary and Aimee Woolverton state, they feel that, “This isn’t what I bargained for!” (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 674-686). Furthermore, crisis, or disillusionment, can occur at any point of time in a marriage. Couples in crisis are facing circumstances that they may not have fully anticipated. They have headed down a path of unhealthy practices for a period of time that results in the relationship reaching a breaking point or a state of accepted malaise (Blumberg, Markman, and Stanley 2010, 31-33; Parrott and Parrott 2005, 87-88). Seventy-five to ninety percent of couples who are in crisis consider divorce as a viable option. The vast majority of couples in distress are dissatisfied, unhappy, and have few relational strengths (Larson, Olson, and Olson-Sigg 2008, 27-28).

Remarriage is a common practice in our culture. Senior Researcher at Pew Research Center, Gretchen Livingston, states that a growing number of Americans are remarrying. In fact, since the 1960’s, remarriages have seen a three-fold increase (Livingston 2014). As of 2013, forty percent of all married couples have entered into, at least, a second marriage (Livingston 2014). Contributions toward the increase of remarriage include a trend towards senior adults remarrying, comfort with wider age gaps with partners, and the financial benefits of marital unions (Livingston 2014). In light of this, remarried couples are a separate couple type although they experience premarital, enrichment, and crisis aspects. Furthermore, remarriages experience greater risk than first time marriages due to the stresses some encounter with new parenting roles, as well as, the demonstration that they are willing to walk away from an unhappy relationship (Stanton 1997, 145). Remarriages do not occur within the setting of

the church as frequently as first time marriages (Knutson and Olson 2003, 529). Therefore, the church should treat them uniquely due to the distinctive challenges they face and the potential disconnectedness from the body of Christ.

Not all couples can be approached in identical ways. Couples that represent premarital, enrichment, crisis, and remarriage dynamics are each uniquely challenged. All marital relationships will have some parallel needs and approaches. Yet, in addition to basic similarities, each couple type should have a unique set of ministerial approaches. We will now explore the ministry role of preparation, education, inspiration, and intervention with these diverse couple types.

### Ministering to Couples

There are common practices with all couple types. When a church wishes to impact the relational health of marriages they may adopt some of these practical ministry tools. For instance, some churches choose to participate in a community based healthy marriage agreement. This document, agreed upon by the local church only or in a group of churches within a community, endeavors to raise the standard of healthy marriage expectations, therefore, raising the health of marriages. Other ministries choose creative opportunities, like the "Date Night Initiative", which, according to research, "increases communication, creativity in the relationship, enhances romantic love, solidifies commitment, and decreases stress" (Dew and Wilcox 2012, 3-4). Another effective tool that can be applied across couple types is marriage mentoring. Marriage experts, Les and Leslie Parrott, define marriage mentoring as, "a relatively happy, more experienced

couple purposefully investing in another couple to effectively navigate a journey that they have already taken" (Parrott and Parrott 2005, 30). Mentoring, date night initiatives, and healthy marriage policies do not stand alone as an exhaustive list of tools to impact couple health, but they are powerful examples of proactive ministry that can aid any couple type.

While there are more universal approaches to couple types, there are specific needs for couples at different phases. Les and Leslie Parrott make a case for ministering through the lens of a triad. This three foci approach highlights preparing, maximizing, and repairing when working with couples (Parrott and Parrott 2005, 55). Likewise, the following are specific approaches of preparation, education, inspiration, and intervention.

The church has an important responsibility assisting engaged couples in preparing for a life-long healthy marriage. The ultimate goal for premarital preparation is long lasting, healthy marriage. Premarital preparation should be preventative in nature (Knutson and Olson 2003, 530). Best practice calls for a formalized process for couples to walk through before the wedding date. This formalized process, often called a wedding policy, not only deals with logistics with the wedding day, but more importantly the premarital sessions concerned with every day after the vows are exchanged. Requirements that are based on policies adopted by the local church may include "a premarital inventory coupled with a subsequent analysis and discussion of the results, related premarital counseling, and premarital training" through seminars or classes (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 603-617). Research has shown that preparation efforts

with engaged couples that include a premarital inventory and several follow up sessions with a trained facilitator can predict up to an 85 percent success rate (Knutson and Olson 2003, 532). In fact, pastoral and church implementation of these programs makes a significant impact on the health and vitality of couples way beyond the wedding day (Aholou, Barton, Futris, and Seponski 2011, 69; Knutson and Olson 2003, 542-544).

Like many endeavors in life, continued education can be beneficial. For couples it can be formative in relational health and vitality. In order to experience ongoing growth, couples must be able to take in new information germane to their relationship and process this new information in a productive way. Marriage education is not therapy, but is preventive information and application with the goal of empowering couples to have long lasting healthy marriages (Hawkins and VanDenBerghe 2014, 8). Although, education may take on many forms, whether it comes through books, classes, retreats, or seminars, the goal remains for healthier relationships that can with stand in times of crisis and apathy (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 279). Scott Stanley states that education is a key investment in relational health and vitality. In fact, he calls this investment “relational capital” that can sustain a marriage for the long haul (Stanley 2005, 215). In addition, relational education for couples becomes essential for those who may not have had a stable family of origin or who may not enjoy economic or educational advantages. Research confirms that marriage education not only makes an immediate impact on married couples, but, when assessed over a long period of time, there is evidence of continued health and vitality. In fact, one

study of military couples, a demographic that exhibits higher risk marriages, concluded that the divorce rate two years after a marriage education experience was significantly lower than those without the experience (Hawkins and VanDenBerghe 2014, 6-7, 12-13).

Inspiration, like education, moves couples towards greater satisfaction in their relationship. Inspiration is the encouragement of marriages towards higher satisfaction and greater perceived value of their relationship. This could be needed as couples are experiencing boredom through the monotony of the child rearing years or the malaise of the retirement years (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 780). Enrichment is another name for inspiration. Enrichment may come through a marriage educational experience, but can also be experienced through many opportunities that a church may offer. Gary and Aimee Woolverton remind us that the “role of the church at this [enrichment] phase is to provide couples with ample opportunities for growth, both as a couple and as followers of Christ” (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 626, 660). Marriages can move into crisis and increased conflict when inspiration is absent. This is when intervention is necessary.

The church must play a key role in divorce prevention (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 674-686). Taking a proactive stance on marriage and intervening with couples who are struggling reinforces the churches commitment to long lasting healthy unions. Often time’s, distressed couples without intervention will not survive. Pastoral counseling, trained lay mentors, marriage education and small group care are a few of the programmatic options for the

church (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 712). In fact, “divorce orientation education” course work for couples considering or already involved in the divorce process, has shown to help about 10% of participating couples toward restoration rather than termination (Hawkins and VanDenBerghe 2014, 6-7, 13). Before the church intervenes, great benefit will result from formulating a biblical approach to divorce and remarriage. Programmatic implementation can be inserted for maximum impact out of this biblical approach (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 3932).

### Personal Conclusions

Premarital, enrichment, crisis, and remarried couples are each uniquely challenged. The church can minister through preparation, education, inspiration, and intervention programs. In addition, Glen Stanton suggests the following for the church in order to strengthen marriages of all types:

1. Develop and communicate a solid theology of marriage,
2. take the lead on marital tradition,
3. denominations need a strategy to equip and educate couples,
4. seminaries should train pastor/leaders to prepare couples for marriage and grow couples who are married,
5. marriages that are joined by faith communities should only be dissolved by faith communities,
6. implement mentoring programs,
7. practice aggressive outreach to divorcing couples,
8. publish pro-marriage educational material,

9. celebrate world marriage day/national marriage week. (Stanton 1997, 173-178)

While it is beyond the scope of this project to cover an exhaustive list of programmatic possibilities, Stanton's list along with the concise treatment above gives a general trend towards marriage health ministries. The last two decades have been unprecedented in marriage health intervention through government funding and non-profit programming. The church has benefitted from this emphasis. In addition, the church has also been on the forefront of this emphasis, represented, in part, by many Christians in the political and secular arena. Much of this work has been reactionary to the divorce rate increase, economic decline of single parents, and the negative impact upon children. In light of this, marriage and family experts and practitioners have discovered best practices and areas of primary concern and impact. This has led to the trend of focusing on the couple types and methods highlighted in this section on theories and trends.

I believe the church continues to be positioned for positive impact. Premarital, enrichment, crisis, and remarried couples are being impacted towards greater health in their relationships due to the healthy marriage initiatives that lie inside and outside of the church. Preparation, education, inspiration, and intervention efforts are greatly enhanced through the use of the specific tool called Prepare Enrich. Prepare Enrich is an assessment tool that can positively impact marriages when applied to a couple of any type. In the final section of this

chapter we will explore the use of Prepare Enrich as a specific model and practice for the local church context.

### **Models and Practices**

The purpose of this project is to impact the relationship health of participating married couples at Orange Friends Church through the Prepare-Enrich Group Program. The research question is: To what extent does the Prepare-Enrich Group Program impact the relationship health of select married couples at Orange Friends Church? The purpose of this project starts with an understanding of the contemporary foundations found in this chapter up to this point. The final section of this chapter will explore the applied tool of the Prepare Enrich Group Program.

Prepare Enrich is the “leading relationship inventory” (Larson, Olson and Olson, 2012, 30-31). This relationship inventory has two primary goals. First, the desire is to impact premarital couples by helping them prepare for marriage. This is the *Prepare* aspect. Secondly, there is a desire to impact married couples through enriching their relationship. This is the *Enrich* aspect. Both of these stated goals are accomplished “by increasing [the couple’s] awareness of relationship strengths and growth areas and providing them with the skills to improve their relationship” (Larson, Olson and Olson, 2012, 30-31).

The Prepare-Enrich Group Program is the group application of the assessment. It is appropriate for couples of all types previously mentioned in this chapter. This tool applies the key approaches of preparation, education, inspiration, and intervention. These approaches are enlisted in order to avoid

undue termination of marital relationships and to move couples towards greater health and vitality (Larson, Olson and Olson, 2012, 30). While the Prepare Enrich Group Program is not an exclusive application, it can play an important role in a local church's strategy for marriage ministry.

### Prepare-Enrich Group Program

Over three million couples have participated in the Prepare Enrich inventory during the last thirty years through the assistance of over 100,000 certified facilitators. The vast majority of these couples were exposed to this tool in conjoint sessions with a trained facilitator, rather than a group experience. The trained facilitators include counselors, clergy, family therapists, psychologists, social workers, and other relationship professionals who completed a certification workshop of at least six hours. This tool has been particularly helpful for those implementing marriage ministries within the context of the local church. Pastors describe it as "being highly relevant and user-friendly" (Larson, Olson and Olson, 2012, 30).

In regards to the robust nature of the instrument, the assessment's sponsoring organization reports that,

PREPARE/ENRICH has been scientifically developed and has high reliability, high validity, and large national norms with couples from various ethnic groups. Numerous studies demonstrate the rigor of the assessment and its relevance to couples from a variety of ethnic groups. (Larson, Olson and Olson, 2012, 30)

The results of the assessments have provided a wealth of information in a database. This database provides "unique opportunities to make discoveries about premarital and married couples" (Larson, Olson and Olson, 2012, 30).

Several longitudinal studies have demonstrated that Prepare Enrich has an impact on the satisfaction and happiness of couples. In addition, couples who participate in the Prepare Enrich program exhibit a lower divorce rate (Knutson and Olson 2003, 532). This scientific foundation lends to higher confidence levels in application as churches seek to impact marital relationships.

Prepare Enrich is unique in its core scales and its ability to be customized for each individual couple. The core scales include the topics of communication, conflict resolution, partner style and habits, financial management, leisure activities, affection and sexuality, family and friends, relationship roles, and spiritual beliefs. Customized scales include topics such as “cohabitation issues, cultural/ethnic issues, interfaith/interchurch, dating issues, forgiveness and a variety of scales for parenting based on the age of the child and parenting situations (parenting expectations, step-parenting, intergenerational issues, etc.).” (Larson, Olson and Olson, 2012, 31). Other important components include measurement of personality, assertiveness/self-confident versus avoidance/partner dominance, areas of stress, closeness and flexibility, and family of origin issues. Facilitators can also designate spiritual and faith-based scales for appropriate application within a church context. Overall, this tool is dependent upon identifying areas of strength, facilitator evaluation of the couple based on their areas of strength, giving feedback and applying prescribed exercises, and strengthening the couple’s skills of communication and conflict resolution (Larson, Olson and Olson 2012, 32).

I have already mentioned the couple types of premarital, enrichment, crisis, and remarriage. These type designations are based upon the stage of the couple's relationship. Prepare Enrich results designate a different kind of couple type. The difference with the assessed types is based upon happiness, satisfaction, and the strength level of core scales mentioned above. Premarital, enrichment, crisis, or remarriage couples are represented in the following types. The five types of Prepare Enrich couples are:

- 1) Vitalized- Score the highest in most categories. This is the happiest and healthiest couple type.
- 2) Harmonious- Score high in many categories. Couples enjoy health and satisfaction, but they are not quite as strong as the vitalized couple's.
- 3) Conventional- Score moderate in most categories. Couples have moderate relational health and have fewer strength areas.
- 4) Conflicted- Score low in many categories. Couples have low health and satisfaction.
- 5) Devitalized (married couples only)- Score low in nearly every category. Couples are very unhappy and have need for growth in almost every area. (Larson, Olson and Olson-Sigg 2008, 24-28; Knutson and Olson 2003, 542)

It is tremendously helpful for facilitators to have clarity on the health and satisfaction of the couple that they are assisting.

### *Other Models*

Prepare Enrich program is not the only model available for the local church wishing to impact relationship health. Other models include an assessment, feedback, and instruction during a set time period. Similar programs include the PAIRS program, the PREP program, and the Relationship Enhancement program (Knutson and Olson 2003, 352). While there are positives and negatives to each of these comparative models, the accessibility of the Prepare Enrich program allows for it to be applied more readily for clergy.

In the following, two other models that the church may apply will be explored. These models are slightly different from the assessment, feedback, and instruction model. They represent broader, ongoing marriage ministry. The Parrott's Marriage Mentorship model and the Woolverton's Marriage Ministry by Design model are viable options for a church wishing to impact the relational health of married couples within their context.

Co-directors of the Center for Relationship Development, Les and Leslie Parrott, are leaders in the area of marriage mentoring. In their book, *The Complete Guide to Marriage Mentoring*, they call marriage mentoring a "sleeping giant visible in every congregation." Furthermore, this "giant", when awoken, is a "team of couples who have what it takes to make a powerful impact on marriages around them." Like the Prepare Enrich group program, "marriage mentoring applies to every stage and phase of married life" (Parrott and Parrott 2005, 19). This model fits well within a church whose mission is to make and grow disciples. The training, equipping, and positioning married couples into ministry

opportunities with premarital, enrichment, crisis, and remarried couples fulfills the call to disciple. A challenge for a local pastor may be in raising up at least one couple. The Parrott's claim that "every congregation" has this potential may not be considering the vast majority of small churches who may struggle to find greeters, ushers, or song leaders, let alone marriages mentors. Medium size and large churches may find the Marriage Mentorship model to have an impact on couples within their context.

Gary and Aimee Woolverton lays out an aggressive and exhaustive marriage ministry plan in their book *Marriage Ministry by Design: Designing Effective Ministry to Marriages in the Church and Beyond*. The motivation with this model is to build strong marriages which will result in churches that are strong and growing (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 807). As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Woolverton's suggest sixteen different components for impacting relational health of married couples in the local church (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 1801). These sixteen components cover all stages and types of couples. This model also would encompass both marriage mentoring and the use of the Prepare Enrich instrument and group program. Although this model is beneficially thorough, it would be difficult for most churches to implement all of the suggestions in this model due to the amount of resources required. Nevertheless, limited resources should not hinder churches from implementing, at least, a few of the suggested programs in order to impact the health of marriages.

## Church Application

Although the majority of couples who take the Prepare Enrich inventory process the findings in a conjoint application, a group experience has shown benefits for individual couples. The Prepare Enrich Group Program can be done in different formats with identical curriculum. Group sessions, either held over several weeks, or held in a one day format, show similar significant impact on couple satisfaction and health. The key aspect is when a group program is guided by a couple assessment there are stronger positive outcomes (Aholou, Barton, Futris, and Seponski 2011, 83-84). Most churches can implement the group format of Prepare Enrich no matter what their size or limitation of resources.

Furthermore, the benefit of implementing the Prepare Enrich Group Program includes cost efficiency and enhanced learning through couples interacting with one another. Possible negative aspects of the group program include the limitation of individual time each couple may have for practicing the skills being learned in each session, the lack of specificity for each couple's challenges and strengths, and the discomfort that some individuals may have with sharing in a group about their relationship (Aholou, Barton, Futris, and Seponski 2011, 72). As a marriage ministry program, The Prepare Enrich Group Program is manageable. It fits well within other strategies and approaches that a pastor may want to implement. If a church wishes to focus on marriage mentoring the group program with assessment can be an effective tool to impact couples towards greater growth relationally or raise up further mentors to pour

into other couples. In other words, the Prepare Enrich Group Program can wake the Parrott's sleeping giant. If a pastor has the responsibility of a congregation with resources enough to support Woolverton's full model, this group program fits well into the marriage ministries mission to impact couples in a positive way. Churches of all sizes and means, as well as, couples of all stages and types can be impacted by the Prepare Enrich Group Program.

### Conclusion

Churches hold a unique position in our culture for engagement and impact upon marriages. The position is best handled through active advocacy. Healthy marriages are important. Yet, while marital unions are celebrated within our cultural context, they are battered from high divorce rates, lower confidence levels in young people, and the onslaught of societal redefinition. Each of these struggles, and others, have a cause. They each have an impact on other areas of our culture, as well. The climate of marriage in our culture influences the health of children, how we respond to those with same gender attraction, economic stability, and much more. This is why the churches impact on marriages is so important. We have an opportunity to be salt and light in order to speak life.

The church has a precedent set from within and from without. Many people within the church have advocated for healthy marriages through the work of the church. Other Christians represent the body of Christ by engaging with secular institutions with such things as the Healthy Marriage Initiative. Most of these efforts are spent on investing in premarital, enrichment, crisis intervention, and remarriages.

While there are many programs available, the Prepare Enrich Group Program provides an opportunity to impact relationships at any phase and of any type. Pastors and volunteer leaders within the church must become certified facilitators to implement this program. After this initial certification the investment is minimal. Through this program the couples are receiving helpful and interesting feedback. At the same time, facilitators receive beneficial insight into each couple and a reliable structure. The Prepare Enrich Group Program is an option for the church to have an active advocacy for marriage health.

The next chapter will describe the design and procedure for this project. Included will be the context of the study, a description of the participants, and the project assessment.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

The purpose of this project was to impact the relationship health of participating married couples at Orange Friends Church, Lewis Center, Ohio, through the Prepare-Enrich Group Program. Prepare-Enrich is a scientifically validated relationship inventory and couples assessment tool which is used as a foundational program for premarital counseling, marriage enrichment, couples therapy, marriage mentoring and marriage education. The Prepare-Enrich Group Program is the group application of this device.

The design of the program was a six-session group experience covering various relationship topics. The program's weekly sessions included an agenda of the Prepare-Enrich curriculum designed for a group of couples, through which participants took part in couple-centered exercises, group discussion, suggestions for further application between sessions, and teaching from the facilitators.

This material was led by my wife and myself, who are trained and certified facilitators with Prepare-Enrich. As the facilitators of the experience, my wife and I worked with couples in the role of marriage coach. Our strategy of marriage coaching included instruction, exercises, and discussion to lead the couples towards achieving goals related to greater relationship health. The Prepare-Enrich curricula focused on a pre-session inventory measuring relationship health that each participant took online, one week prior to the group activities. The inventories were then interpreted by us, the facilitators, and the results were

disseminated throughout the program to customize each couple's experience and to aid couples in learning and growing.

Couples were self-selected from those who regularly attended Orange Friends Church, those who regularly attended other churches in the Lewis Center area, and couples in the community with no church affiliation. The sixty to ninety minute sessions were held weekly on Wednesday evenings at Orange Friends Church in Lewis Center, Ohio. At the first session, individuals were given a pre-test of closed-ended questions based on the project goals. The participants were given a post-test of the same questions, along with, different open-ended questions at the end of the final session. The quantitative questions were phrased as statements using an agreement scale with five choices from totally agree to totally disagree. These choices were paired with a number. The qualitative questions were open-ended questions that requested personal feedback. All assessments were voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

The goals for this project were:

1. To impact participating couples through the discovery of the status of their relationship health.
2. To impact participating individuals through the discovery of how they may be contributing towards the status of the relationship health of their marriage.
3. To impact participating couples through the increase of practical communication skills.
4. To impact participating couples through the increase of practical conflict resolution skills.

5. To impact participating couples through the increase of the level of satisfaction in their relationship.
6. To impact participating couple's feelings of being better equipped to continuously mature in the health of their relationship.

### **Context**

This project was implemented through the marriage ministry at Orange Friends Church. Orange Friends Church is a congregation that has been in existence since 1904, yet it is situated in an affluent community that has seen rapid population growth over the last twenty years. Young families are the dominant demographic within a five mile radius, and marriage and parenting issues are of great interest to this upwardly mobile community. Between more recent attendees and long-standing members, Orange Friends Church reflects the community, both past and present.

Like most churches, Orange Friends Church cares for the health of marriages and its ability to help relationships inside and outside the church. This church's hope is to offer assistance towards healthier marriages and a clear gospel message for participants who have not yet confessed Christ as Lord and Savior. It is also a value of this church's marriage ministry to serve other churches through ministries that build relational health between couples within their congregations. Although this is the vision of Orange Friends Church, during the Prepare-Enrich program there were limited opportunities beyond this six week class to see this ideal come to fruition.

At the time of this program, the marriage ministry at Orange Friends Church was somewhat underdeveloped. This was primarily due to leadership needs. The church included about one hundred regular attending adults. Out of this number, leadership for ministry that was focused on marriage health was void, and had been for quite some time. My wife and I were the sole champions of this effort, and divided our time between it and our work on many other areas within the church that were in need of development. Therefore, through efforts like the Prepare-Enrich group program, we sought not only to contribute toward healthy marriages, but it was our hope to also create a conduit for leadership development and promote a vision for expanded marriage ministry.

In spite of the lack of key lay leadership, Orange Friends Church had taken some action to minister to couples. They celebrated marriage on special Sundays during worship, offered an annual marriage education seminar called RINGS (Real Intimacy and Growth Skills), and adopted a Healthy Marriage Policy.

The congregationally approved Healthy Marriage Policy, which currently hangs in a public location in the church building, states that the church is committed to better prepare, strengthen, and restore marriages. This policy outlines eight key actions to accomplish this vision. A critical affirmation and action point of the Healthy Marriage Policy at Orange Friends Church called for four to six months of premarital preparation and mentoring for all stages of marriage. The church had fulfilled this through the implementation of the Prepare-Enrich assessment. Since 2008, when I became the pastor at Orange

Friends Church, every couple who was married at our church, and each couple who came to us for assistance, took this assessment. They were guided through the results by my wife and me, who are certified facilitators of this material. This adherence to the Healthy Marriage Policy and the use of the Prepare-Enrich assessment aided in the development of a church culture with a positive view of relationship assessments implemented by someone who is formally trained in their use.

### **Participants**

Orange Friends Church has actively engaged the community in the name of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the participants for this Prepare-Enrich Group Program were **twenty-five couples from diverse backgrounds and couple status.** **The group included married couples and pre-marital couples.** Eighty percent of the couples were regular attendees of Orange Friends Church, while the remaining couples either attended other churches or were not attending a church. **Only two of the couples were unmarried -- one of which was cohabiting.**

**While diverse in some ways, the participating couples were largely made up of a suburban middle-class demographic.** All of the married couples involved represented all levels of marriage health as defined by the Prepare-Enrich curriculum: some of the couples were conflicted or devitalized in their relationship, while others had a harmonious or vitalized marriage. No matter what their relationship status, all the couples participating had room for growth and development. Twenty-three of the twenty-five couples that started the program completed all six weeks. Two couples who had started the program did not

complete all six weeks. All the couples voluntarily participated in the assessment and sessions. The Prepare-Enrich assessment and group experience was open to all willing and available couples in the given context.

The Prepare-Enrich assessment cumulative results revealed that participating couples represented diversity in relational health. Only four couples in the sessions assessed as harmonious or vitalized. Couples who score significantly high on the Prepare-Enrich assessment indicate high relationship health and are considered vitalized. Typically, couples in the vitalized category are most satisfied with their relationship and are skilled in communication and conflict resolution. Couples who score moderately high on the Prepare-Enrich assessment indicate moderate-to-high relationship health and are considered harmonious. Typically, couples in the harmonious category have high levels of satisfaction in many areas of their relationship. Harmonious and vitalized couples represent those who can experience enrichment and further benefit to an already healthy relationship through sharpening previously learned healthy relational habits, as well as acquiring new skills.

Out of the couples that completed the course, most (ten out of twenty-three) represented a conventional couple type. Couples who score moderate on the Prepare-Enrich assessment indicate moderate relationship health and are considered conventional. Typically, couples in the conventional category are highly committed to one another but lack skills in communication and conflict resolution.

Conflicted (six out of twenty-three) and devitalized (three out of twenty-three) couples represented about four out of ten within the group. Couples who score moderately low on the Prepare-Enrich assessment indicate moderate-to-poor relationship health and are considered conflicted. Typically, couples in the conflicted category have lower satisfaction and often struggle in many areas of their relationship. Couples who score significantly low on the Prepare-Enrich assessment indicate poor relationship health and are considered devitalized. Typically, couples in the devitalized category would have the lowest levels of satisfaction and have growth areas in almost every aspect of their relationship.

In other words, the vast majority (nineteen out of twenty-three) of the participating couples exhibited moderate-to-poor health within their relationship. These couples represented relationships that tended to lack the habits and skills which contribute towards healthy marriages. Although the couple types leaned toward unhealthy, I observed that they were actively teachable. This was evidence primarily through attendance (the participants had a high attendance record and showed up to each class in a timely fashion), eager participation in the Prepare-Enrich assessment and group discussion, as well as individual couple interaction. Couples were receptive to marriage coaching during each session as they participated as active learners. This further indicated a high level of being open to new ideas and healthy habits.

### **Procedure**

Since the purpose of this project was to impact the relationship health of participating married couples at Orange Friends Church, Lewis Center, Ohio,

through the Prepare-Enrich Group Program, I put together a six week program using the Prepare-Enrich assessment, group format Prepare-Enrich assessment results, and the Prepare-Enrich curriculum. I modified the curriculum for use over six sessions from the suggested, but optional, ten-week format. Self-selected couples signed up after an allotted time of open promotion for the course. After the participating couples signed up, each individual participant took the Prepare-Enrich inventory online prior to the first class session. The results were then printed and kept on file to be revealed as we dealt with the specific subject matter found in the detailed results.

The Prepare-Enrich inventory provided three reports: the Group Program report, the standard Couple report, and the standard Facilitator report. The Group Program report was used with participating couples as an aid for discovery and active learning within the program experience. The standard Couple report was unused for this specific program. The standard Facilitator report was used as an aid for my wife and me – the program facilitators. The intended use of this detailed report is to aid the trained facilitators; it is not to be shown to couples. The insight gained from the Facilitator report is meant to enhance the facilitators' ability to work with couples by providing greater understanding through detailed analysis.

Facilitators and participants met on Wednesdays over six consecutive weeks, and child care was provided. A door prize drawing was held to encourage timeliness and attendance. The following topics were covered over the six week experience:

1. Discovering strength and growth areas
2. Relationship dynamics and communication
3. Stress and conflict resolution
4. Intimacy
5. Closeness, flexibility, and family of origin
6. Setting goals: achieving more together than separate

Packets with the relevant assessment results and all relevant exercises from the Prepare-Enrich published workbook were assembled by my wife and me each week. These packets were picked up by couples as they arrived. The agenda for each Ninety minute session reflected the following pattern:

1. Welcome, door prize drawing, and pertinent announcements
2. Ice breaker and group discussion
3. Teaching
4. Couple learning exercise
5. Assessment results (accessed from envelopes when instructed)
6. Group Wrap-up

Between classes, homework was typically assigned to help couples process the topic from the session. The envelopes with assessment results and Prepare-Enrich workbooks were left on site each week. These items were sent home with the participants after the final session.

## **Assessment**

As previously stated, the goals for this project were:

1. To impact participating couples through the discovery of the status of their relationship health.
2. To impact participating individuals through the discovery of how they may be contributing towards the status of the relationship health of their marriage.
3. To impact participating couples through the increase of practical communication skills.
4. To impact participating couples through the increase of practical conflict resolution skills.
5. To impact participating couples through the increase of the level of satisfaction in their relationship.
6. To impact participating couple's feelings of being better equipped to continuously mature in the health of their relationship.

These goals were established to help answer the research question: To what extent does the Prepare-Enrich Group Program impact the relationship health of select married couples at Orange Friends Church? In order to measure these six goals, a pre-test and post-test was given to the participants. The pre-test and post-test described in this section were designed to measure project goals. The Prepare-Enrich assessment was part of the participating couples experience and was not used or designed to evaluate the achievement of project goals.

At the first session, individuals were given a pre-test of eighteen closed-ended questions based on the project goals, and the participants were given a post-test of the same eighteen questions at the end of the final session. The post-test included six additional open-ended questions that requested personal feedback. The quantitative questions were phrased as statements using an agreement scale with six choices from strongly disagree to strongly agree as follows:

- 1- Strongly Disagree
- 2- Moderately Disagree
- 3- Slightly Disagree
- 4- Slightly Agree
- 5- Moderately Agree
- 6- Strongly Agree

Each of six project goals had three quantitative questions and one qualitative question for impact measurement. Forty-three individuals (twenty-one couples) voluntarily, anonymously, and confidentially completed pre-test and post-test questionnaires for this project.

The results of both the pre-test and post-test were compared for each individual to measure plus or minus change. The three questions assigned for each goal were compared for change in order to recognize the impact of the program on those areas of concern. Open-ended questions were used to further clarify, confirm, and catch contradictions within the data. The results of the assessments will be reported in Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### REPORTING THE RESULTS

The purpose of this project was to impact the relationship health of participating married couples at Orange Friends Church through the Prepare-Enrich Group Program. The research question was: To what extent did the Prepare-Enrich Group Program impact the relationship health of select married couples at Orange Friends Church?

The goals for this project were:

1. To impact participating couples through the discovery of the status of their relationship health.
2. To impact participating individuals through the discovery of how they may be contributing towards the status of the relationship health of their marriage.
3. To impact participating couples through the increase of practical communication skills.
4. To impact participating couples through the increase of practical conflict resolution skills.
5. To impact participating couples through the increase of the level of satisfaction in their relationship.
6. To impact participating couple's feelings of being better equipped to continuously mature in the health of their relationship.

The pre-test and post-test assessments used to measure impact were discussed in chapter four. The purpose of the assessments were to serve as a measurement tool of the project goals and the research questions. The eighteen

quantitative questions and the six qualitative questions in each assessment addressed each of the six project goals. Three quantitative questions and one qualitative question were asked for each goal. The difference between the quantitative pre-test and post-test questions were measured and appear below. The goals are presented on the following pages in order of impact from greatest to least.

### **Goal One: Status Awareness**

The goal that indicated the highest impact upon the participating couples was: “Participating couples will discover the status of their relationship health.” The average change from pre-test to post-test for participants was 1.01. The three quantitative questions used for this goal were as follows: I know the strengths of my marriage (#1). I know what improvements are needed for my marriage (#8). I know the health status of my marriage (#11). The individual scores are listed in table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1. Participant Status Awareness	Pre-test	Post-test	Change
8. I know what improvements are needed for my marriage.	3.91	5.42	1.51
11. I know the health status of my marriage.	4.19	5.40	1.21
1. I know the strengths of my marriage.	4.74	5.04	0.3
Average	4.28	5.29	1.01

Note: The scores are mean scores based on the answers given by a total of 43 individuals. They responded on a scale of 1-6, with “1” being “Strongly Disagree,” “2” being “Moderately Disagree,” “3” being “Slightly Disagree,” “4” being “Slightly Agree,” “5” being “Moderately Agree,” and “6” being “Strongly Agree.”

The assessment results were instrumental in health discovery. Over half of the responses to the open-ended question, “What are one or two things that have helped you discover the health status of your marriage?” included praise for the results of the Prepare-Enrich assessment. Other key discovery avenues mentioned by participants included opportunities for open dialogue with one’s partner, the skills taught, and the marriage class environment. The greatest change appeared in knowledge of what improvements are needed for marriage health. This reflected a change of 1.51. The primary indicator was a lower pre-test average (3.91) and the highest post-test result (5.42). Self-awareness increased, thus showing impact through the program.

#### **Goal Four: Conflict Resolution Skills**

The goal with the second highest indication of change was: “Participating couples will increase in practical conflict resolution skills.” The average change from pre-test to post-test for participants was 0.7. The three quantitative

questions used for this goal were as follows: We agree on the best way to resolve a disagreement in our relationship (#6). I tend to avoid conflict with my partner (#10). I can share my feelings with my partner at times of disagreement (#14). The individual scores are listed in table 5.2 below.

Table 5.2. Conflict Resolution Skills	Pre-test	Post-test	Change
6. We agree on the best way to resolve a disagreement in our relationship.	3.40	4.42	1.02
14. I can share my feelings with my partner at times of disagreement.	3.91	4.72	0.81
10. * I tend to avoid conflict with my partner (-).	3.95	3.67	0.28
Average	3.66	4.36	0.7

Note: \*pre- and post- averages on number 10 are switched to reflect correct outcomes.

Note: The scores are mean scores based on the answers given by a total of 43 individuals. They responded on a scale of 1-6, with “1” being “Strongly Disagree,” “2” being “Moderately Disagree,” “3” being “Slightly Disagree,” “4” being “Slightly Agree,” “5” being “Moderately Agree,” and “6” being “Strongly Agree.”

The greatest impact indicated through the quantitative questions was reflected in agreement on resolution strategy and openness of communication. This was reflected with the post-test open-ended responses to the question, “What are one or two skills that have been most helpful for resolving conflict in your marriage?” Participants indicated that listening to their partner had an impact on their ability to resolve conflict. One participant wrote, “Active listening and not just waiting to talk.” Active listening includes repeating back to the speaker what the listener heard and seeking affirmation from the speaker that they felt that they had been heard. Another participant shared, “Listening without

cutting him off because I tend to want to get my two cents in and am trying not to understand his viewpoint.” Participants indicated that they had learned to allow for their partner to share perspective and feelings knowing that they would have an opportunity to be heard when it was their turn to be the speaker. Many participants pointed to communication and conflict resolution skills, like Ten Steps for Resolving Conflict and the Daily Temperature Reading (Daily Dialogue), as helpful in resolving conflict. The Ten Steps for Resolving Conflict is a structured process that aids couples in resolving conflict in a positive way. The Daily Temperature Reading (Daily Dialogue) tool is a simple guide that facilitates daily discussion on the most basic issues a couple needs to communicate about on a regular basis. These skills and others impacted the participant’s ability to resolve conflict in a positive way.

### **Goal Five: Increased Satisfaction**

The goal that indicated the third highest impact upon the participating couples was: “Participating couples will increase in the level of satisfaction in their relationship.” The average change from pre-test to post-test for participants was 0.73. The three quantitative questions used for this goal were as follows: I am satisfied with the relationship I have with my partner (#7). My marital satisfaction has grown over the past six weeks (#9). I am satisfied with my partner’s interest in improving our marriage (#12). The individual scores are listed in table 5.3 below.

Table 5.3. Participant Increased Satisfaction	Pre-test	Post-test	Change
9. My marital satisfaction has grown over the past six weeks.	3.86	5.21	1.35
12. I am satisfied with my partner's interest in improving our marriage.	4.91	5.42	0.51
7. I am satisfied with the relationship I have with my partner.	4.16	4.49	0.33
Average	4.31	5.04	0.73

Note: The scores are mean scores based on the answers given by a total of 43 individuals. They responded on a scale of 1-6, with "1" being "Strongly Disagree," "2" being "Moderately Disagree," "3" being "Slightly Disagree," "4" being "Slightly Agree," "5" being "Moderately Agree," and "6" being "Strongly Agree."

The greatest indication of growth was shown in the 1.35 increase from the beginning of the class to the end of the class in marital satisfaction. When asked what would help achieve greater satisfaction, participants indicated that time spent together was a key contributor. In fact, more than half of the qualitative comments emphasized the value of quality time together. The Prepare-Enrich group experience counted for over nine hours of class time over six weeks. Outside of class time participants were encouraged to process the material together. This focused quality time provided the environment for continued relational health. Though not as pronounced, participants indicated an impact on perceived partner interest in improvement and personal satisfaction over the course of the six week experience. These results reinforce the positive impact on the level of satisfaction that the Prepare-Enrich group experience provides.

## Goal Two: Individual Contribution

Goal number two and three showed the same level of impact at 0.72 average change for participants from pre-test to post-test. Goal two was: “Participating individuals will discover how they may be contributing towards the status of relationship health of their marriage.” The three quantitative questions used for this goal were as follows: I recognize my behaviors that may bring strength to our marriage (#5). My actions contribute to improving our marriage (#13). I recognize my behaviors that may cause our relationship to weaken (#15). The individual scores are listed in table 5.4 below.

	Pre-test	Post-test	Change
13. My actions contribute to improving our marriage.	4.58	5.37	0.79
15. I recognize my behaviors that may cause our relationship to weaken.	4.40	5.16	0.76
5. I recognize my behaviors that may bring strength to our marriage.	4.53	5.14	0.61
Average	4.50	5.22	0.72

Note: The scores are mean scores based on the answers given by a total of 43 individuals. They responded on a scale of 1-6, with “1” being “Strongly Disagree,” “2” being “Moderately Disagree,” “3” being “Slightly Disagree,” “4” being “Slightly Agree,” “5” being “Moderately Agree,” and “6” being “Strongly Agree.”

The pre-test and post-test responses indicated an improvement in self-awareness of contribution of actions that were helpful and those that were detrimental to the health of the marriage. Qualitative responses to the open-ended question, “What are one or two things that have helped you discover how you may be affecting the health of you marriage?” revealed positive outcomes as

well. The Prepare-Enrich assessment results were helpful in revealing areas of individual contribution. As the class went through the weekly sessions, individuals discovered ways they best show love through the five love languages tool. They also learned how they respond negatively when facing stress and conflict through the stress animal tool. Both of these tools were mentioned multiple times by participants as beneficial in increasing self-awareness of behaviors and attitudes that affect the health of their marriage. In addition, to a lesser extent, several participants pointed to training in assertiveness and active listening, as well as, family of origin discovery as helpful in detecting ways that they contribute toward the health of their marriage. Experience of impact was indicated as a result of these specific areas of self-discovery and training.

### **Goal Three: Communication Skills**

Goal number two and three showed the same level of impact at 0.58 average change for participants from pre-test to post-test. Goal three was: "Participating couples will increase in practical communication skills." The three quantitative questions used for this goal were as follows: My partner is a good listener (#3). I am satisfied with how we talk with each other in our marriage (#16). It is hard for me to ask my partner for what I want (#17). The individual scores are listed in table 5.5 below.

Table 5.5. Participant Communication Skills	Pre-test	Post-test	Change
16. I am satisfied with how we talk with each other in our marriage.	3.44	4.40	0.96
3. My partner is a good listener.	4.16	4.63	0.47
17. *It is hard for me to ask my partner for what I want (-).	3.91	3.60	0.31
Average	3.73	4.31	0.58

Note: \*pre- and post- averages on number 17 are switched to reflect correct outcomes.

Note: The scores are mean scores based on the answers given by a total of 43 individuals. They responded on a scale of 1-6, with “1” being “Strongly Disagree,” “2” being “Moderately Disagree,” “3” being “Slightly Disagree,” “4” being “Slightly Agree,” “5” being “Moderately Agree,” and “6” being “Strongly Agree.”

Discovering communication habits and learning new communication skills impacted the participating couples. Communication satisfaction showed the greatest increase within the area of communication skills. Participants indicated an average score of 3.44 on the pre-test to the statement, “I am satisfied with how we talk with each other in our marriage.” Of the eighteen pre-test statements, participants gave this one the second lowest score. The only individual statement receiving a lower score was, “We agree on the best way to resolve a disagreement in our relationship,” which falls under the area of conflict resolution. Coming into the class, couples felt less confident with the way they talked with one another and their unity on resolving disagreements. These two areas were among the highest levels of growth shown in the individual statements as well.

When participants were asked what skills from the sessions were most helpful in increasing communication health, the Daily Temperature Reading (Daily Dialogue) was mentioned by the majority of the respondents. This tool is a simple guide that facilitates daily discussion on the most basic issues a couple needs to communicate about on a regular basis. Participants pointed to the practical ease, structure, and deliberate nature of the tool as positive elements they enjoyed. In addition, qualitative answers highlighted the positive nature of healthy assertiveness and active listening. These tools and discoveries provided a conduit for many of the other lessons learned to be processed and applied.

### **Goal Six: Better Equipped**

The goal that indicated the lowest impact upon the participating couples was: “Participating couples will feel better equipped to continuously mature in the health of their relationship.” The average change from pre-test to post-test for participants was 0.1. The three quantitative questions used for this goal were as follows: I am highly motivated to do what it takes to see our marriage grow (#2). I am willing to do whatever it takes to improve our relationship (#4). I am committed to making our marriage last a lifetime (#18). The individual scores are listed in table 5.6 below.

Table 5.6. Participants Feeling Better Equipped	Pre-test	Post-test	Change
2. I am highly motivated to do what it takes to see our marriage grow.	5.60	5.74	0.14
4. I am willing to do whatever it takes to improve our relationship.	5.67	5.77	0.1
18. I am committed to making our marriage last a lifetime.	5.91	5.98	0.07
Average	5.73	5.83	0.1

Note: The scores are mean scores based on the answers given by a total of 43 individuals. They responded on a scale of 1-6, with “1” being “Strongly Disagree,” “2” being “Moderately Disagree,” “3” being “Slightly Disagree,” “4” being “Slightly Agree,” “5” being “Moderately Agree,” and “6” being “Strongly Agree.”

This goal shows little to no change. The pre-test averages were the highest of any set of goal statements. The 5.73 pre-test average would indicate a highly positive attitude of participants about their motivation, willingness, and commitment towards the future health and status of their marriage. The post-test change virtually shows continued high motivation, willingness, and commitment. In addition, the statements used to measure this goal of feeling “better equipped” to mature were misaligned. None of the statements specifically address the goal of being relationally equipped. Therefore, the quantitative responses designated for this goal, while interesting, cannot be applied to this specific impact goal. This being the case, the qualitative responses given to, “What are one or two factors that keep you motivated toward ongoing improvement of your marriage?”, did not give a better indication of the impact of the goal of feeling better equipped to continuously mature in relational health. This qualitative question also missed the intention of the goal.

Participants did not indicate growth in the area of increased relational equipment due to misaligned questions of measurement, but they did specify love, commitment, children/family, and faith/spiritual reasons as motivation for continuous improvement of their marriage. A sampling of the forty written responses for this question include:

- “Love for my family and love for God.”
- “We have both committed completely and there is no other option but to make it work.”
- “. . . our children’s sake, for them to grow up seeing a healthy relationship between a husband and wife.”
- “Jesus. A commitment of a lifetime.”
- “Commitment, family, happiness, choice, Christ.”
- “Faith in God and a desire to be a blessing to our children.”
- “I truly love my wife . . . and I count myself to be very fortunate to be married to her.”

These qualitative responses are important because even with the misalignment between the goal and the specific measurements, the Prepare-Enrich course at Orange Friends Church included highly motivated learners who had a foundation of love, commitment, faith, and value for family. In fact, of the forty post-test comments for this area twelve mentioned love, eleven mentioned commitment, eleven mentioned faith/spiritual elements, and nine mentioned children as motivating factors. The results showed this along with

motivation, willingness, and commitment towards growth and improvement.

They did not indicate increased ability or equipment towards maturity.

### **Summary**

Over the course of the Prepare-Enrich group experience, couples indicated impact in levels of self-awareness, satisfaction, and conflict resolution skills. The results of the Prepare-Enrich assessment, skills taught, concentrated class time, and opportunities to practice these skills were highlighted as conduits of impact and change. In fact, awareness, satisfaction, and unity on the way to resolve conflict in a positive way stood out as positive results of the experience. Chapter six will conclude the summary of this project with reflections on the Prepare-Enrich group experience and results, an application for ministry, concerns for further study, and my personal goals.

## CHAPTER SIX

### SUMMMARY AND REFLECTIONS

Tim and Kathy Keller define marriage as, "a way for two spiritual friends to help each other on their journey to become the persons God designed them to be". In simplest terms, it is the formalized union of "a lifelong, monogamous relationship between a man and a woman" (Keller and Keller 2011, 15-16). Glen Stanton refers to the value of marriage when he states:

First-time, lifelong, monogamous marriage is the relationship that best provides for the most favorable exercise of human sexuality, the overall well-being of adults, and the proper socialization of children. Marriage has no close rival. It stands independently above any other option: singleness, cohabitation, divorce, and remarriage. (Stanton 1997, 11)

It is with the heart of the Keller's' biblical and theological definition of marriage and Stanton's' statement of the value of marriage that this project is built.

Marriage is God's creation and is, at least in part, under the stewardship of the Church. The purpose of this project was to have a positive impact on marital relationships at Orange Friends Church through the specific group application of the Prepare-Enrich program. It was a project of relational stewardship.

The Church faces a daunting task in this effort of stewardship. Marriage is highly valued and highly mistreated simultaneously in our culture. In order to meet the challenges of marital stewardship, pastors need effective tools for marriage ministry that can aid in impacting relationship health. This project measured one such tool in its ability to impact marital health. The Prepare-Enrich Group Program was effective in impacting the participating couples at Orange Friends Church. Couples that participated indicated significant growth in

relational satisfaction, self-awareness, and conflict resolution skills. Therefore, this tool is effective in the task of aiding churches in marital stewardship.

### **Project Goals**

Participants had an overwhelmingly positive experience with the Prepare-Enrich Group Program. Impact was experienced on the relational health of these couples. This was clarified through the accomplishment of the project goals. In order of impact felt, the goals for this project were:

1. To impact participating couples through the discovery of the status of their relationship health.
2. To impact participating individuals through the discovery of how they may be contributing towards the status of the relationship health of their marriage.
3. To impact participating couples through the increase of practical communication skills.
4. To impact participating couples through the increase of practical conflict resolution skills.
5. To impact participating couples through the increase of the level of satisfaction in their relationship.
6. To impact participating couple's feelings of being better equipped to continuously mature in the health of their relationship.

When measured quantitatively, five of the six goals showed a positive change. One goal showed a negligible change. All areas gleaned beneficial qualitative feedback. The goals are presented on the following pages in order of impact from greatest to least.

### Goal One: Relationship Health Discover

The greatest change within this goal appeared in knowledge of what improvements are needed for marriage health. This reflected nearly a forty percent change. Self-discovery through the assessment, open dialogue with one's partner, the skills taught, and group feedback sessions provided the environment for greater awareness. This implies that willing couples who open themselves to teachable moments gain valuable insight that speaks life into their marriage. It also indicates that it is difficult to change in an area of growth if one is not aware of it.

Over half of the responses to the open-ended question, "What are one or two things that have helped you discover the health status of your marriage?" included praise for the results of the Prepare-Enrich assessment. The specificity and volume of information for couples to digest during each session provided plenty to process. Therefore, it can be concluded that the unique nature of the results of the Prepare-Enrich assessment gave participants a look at areas that had previously been unexplored or, at the very least, under-explored. Furthermore, the classroom atmosphere forces couples to work relational muscles that may not be used on a regular basis within their marriage. Discovery of health status opens up the doors for working these relational muscles.

### Goal Four: Conflict Resolution Skills

All couples experience conflict. Most couples lack a strategy to address conflict and the communication skills by which to resolve conflict in a positive way. Participating couples indicated a twenty percent increase in learned new

skills for conflict resolution, which includes skills for healthy communication.

Interestingly, listening was the communication skill most highlighted as a beneficial skill learned under the area of conflict resolution. Couples who struggle with crisis and stagnation are often ill-equipped in the use of active listening and proactive conflict resolution strategies.

Many participants pointed to communication and conflict resolution skills, like Ten Steps for Resolving Conflict and the Daily Temperature Reading (Daily Dialogue), as helpful in resolving conflict. The Ten Steps for Resolving Conflict is a structured process that aids couples in resolving conflict in a positive way. The Daily Temperature Reading (Daily Dialogue) tool is a simple guide that facilitates daily discussion on the most basic issues a couple needs to communicate about on a regular basis. These skills and others impacted the participant's ability to resolve conflict in a positive way. Thus, providing opportunities for healing and ongoing health.

Furthermore, married couples are called to have a bond of active and engaged commitment. This commitment is a dynamic and practical experience. It is practical through skills like active listening and Ten Steps for Resolving Conflict. It is dynamic through reciprocal relationships that seek to console, serve, care for and understand the needs of the other. When fleshed out, each person involved in this redeemed relationship is standing in the stead of the love of Jesus, who is not physically present (Brown 1970, 614). Mutually beneficial, reciprocal relationships express loyalty as a result of active loving awareness in the midst of inevitable conflict.

The results of this goal were influenced slightly by a negatively positioned statement in the assessment. Question number ten should have been stated in the positive to remain consistent with the other eighteen quantitative questions. The negligible change from the pre-test to post-test on this question reflects this inconsistency. The overall impact on this goal was not significant.

#### Goal Five: Increased Satisfaction

The greatest indication of growth was shown in the thirty-five percent increase from the beginning of the class to the end of the class in marital satisfaction. This was a significant impact. When asked what would help achieve greater satisfaction, participants indicated that time spent together was a key contributor. In fact, more than half of the qualitative comments emphasized the value of quality time together. The Prepare-Enrich group experience counted for over nine hours of class time over six weeks. Outside of class time, participants were encouraged to process the material together. This focused quality time provided the environment for continued relational health. These results reinforce the positive impact on the level of satisfaction that the Prepare-Enrich group experience provides.

When there is higher dissatisfaction present within a relationship, there is often decreased healthy communication and higher conflict. When there are higher levels of unresolved conflict and decreased level of healthy communication, there is lower satisfaction within the marriage. This is a cycle that must be broken in order for couples to experience vitalized and harmonious

relationships. Quality time seems to make an impact on this cycle in a positive way. Quality time includes practicing healthy relational skills.

### Goal Two: Individual Contribution

Goal number two was similar to goal number one. Goal two was: "Participating individuals will discover how they may be contributing towards the status of relationship health of their marriage." The significant difference is that of self-awareness. The pre-test and post-test responses indicated that participants became more aware of how their actions contributed in positive ways and/or negative ways to the health of the marriage. Qualitative responses to the open-ended question revealed positive outcomes as well. This implies that the Prepare-Enrich assessment results were helpful in revealing areas of individual contribution. The inventories impact on self-awareness reminds me of Paul's clarity on love in First Corinthians 13. He states that there may be a time that we may see dimly as in a foggy mirror, but through genuine love we can see ourselves, and others, more clearly. Therefore, love is made easier in a marriage as individuals increase in self-awareness of how negative and positive elements are being contributed.

Cherlin's "marriage-go-round" of highly valued marriage and self-centered individualism reflects men and women staring into a dim reflection, rather than the clear view of love (Cherlin 2009, 9). Once again, as Tim Keller states, the greatest enemy of marriage is "sinful self-centeredness" (Keller and Keller 2011, 15). Elevating self in a formalized union of "a lifelong, monogamous relationship between a man and a woman" directly impacts the health status of the marriage.

### Goal Three: Communication Skills

Couples indicated that they came into the class with low satisfaction on how they talked with one another. They were overwhelmingly dissatisfied with how their partner listened to them and how they spoke to them. It is interesting that couples seem to spend hours talking with each other throughout the dating and engagement phase of their relationship. Then, after the wedding day, many couples increase in poor communication habits. This is the result of decreased effort at keeping the relationship in a growth pattern and the lack of maturity as new and challenging life experiences confront the couple.

Being ill-equipped in communication skills is not where couples are destined to land for the entirety of their marriage. Discovering communication habits and learning new communication skills impacted the participating couples. Participants pointed to the practical ease, structure, and deliberate nature of the tool such as the Daily Temperature Reading as helpful. This tool practiced with the skills of healthy assertiveness and active listening increased its effectiveness.

The results of this goal were influenced slightly by a negatively positioned statement in the assessment. Question number seventeen should have been stated in the positive to remain consistent with the other eighteen quantitative questions. The negligible change from the pre-test to post-test on this question reflects this inconsistency. The overall impact on this goal was not significant

### Goal Six: Better Equipped

Couples indicated little to no change for this goal. The pre-test averages were the highest of any set of goal statements. This implies that the participating

couples entered the program with high motivation, willingness, and commitment. This would also imply that the goal and assessment questions were the weakest of the six. In hindsight, I would select different assessment statements that better aligned with the goal. Being better equipped is an excellent goal for impacting the relational health of marriages. I do not believe the assessment questions reflected this goal well enough. Although, the assessment questions did rightly measure motivation, willingness, and commitment.

Even with the misalignment between the goal and the specific measurements, the Prepare-Enrich course at Orange Friends Church included highly motivated learners who had a foundation of love, commitment, faith, and value for family. Participants specified love, commitment, children/family, and faith/spiritual reasons as motivation for continuous improvement of their marriage. This implies that the participants had pre-existing or newly discovered points of motivation through the program. Tangible points of motivation for ongoing health and vitality are essential for long lasting healthy marriages. As I discussed in chapter three, the benefits of marriage are experienced by individuals, families, and communities. When these benefits are realized, motivation is increased.

### **Application**

The unique nature of the Prepare-Enrich Group Program is the inventory. The personalized information received by the couple, and the facilitator, is of great value. The program participant's assessments reflect this beneficial attribute. The highest level of impact was in regards to increased self-awareness.

The inventory results show a tremendous amount of information. When used strategically, the results are even greater. An outflow of this project includes a commitment on my part to use the Prepare-Enrich inventory for all marriages within our marriage ministry programs. In fact, I would recommend this tool as a low cost, high impact program for every local church intending to effect marriages in a positive way.

The skills learned in the group sessions were another area of high impact. Although the conflict resolution area showed greater impact than the area of communication, this may be a negligible difference due to how closely related the two are in marriage enrichment. Furthermore, couples are more willing to learn and use new tools and skills if they recognize their need. The inventory reveals areas of growth and areas of strength which primes the couple for conversation and motivates them to practice new skills.

Not only do couples need to learn new skills, but they need to have an environment in which to practice those skills. The group sessions provided such an environment. I continue to advocate for group programs that will place couples in an incubator for self-discovery, skill acquisition, and immediate application. I often tell couples not to expect to solve all of their problems in the class session, rather they must commit to learning and practicing the skills in the class session that will address most of their problems over many years to come. Many of the participants credited the learning environment as a key component of impact.

There is something about learning in community. The group experience provides what the church is equipped to do so well. We are equipped and called to walk through marriage enrichment as contributing members of the Body. Practically, the role of priest for a Christian is seen through active participation using one's gifts, sharing the Word, participation in the sacraments, offering spiritual sacrifice, and intercession for others (Grenz 1994, 555; Bloesch 1998, 107, 118). Therefore, the role of priest is that of relational responsibility, not just individual exercise. As priests, all members of the body of Christ bear a responsibility to participate fully in worship, edification, and outreach. They are called together to do the business of the church as a group of priestly participants. This becomes a spiritual experience and an opportunity to express healthy marital relationships (Grenz 1994, 556). Furthermore, marriages can be at their healthiest and happiest when Christ following, Spirit-led spouses engage one another as priestly participants. I envision churches fulfilling this call through marriage preparation, enrichment, and intervention in a group setting.

As a pastor, I am called to preach on a weekly basis. Being up front teaching is not a struggle for me. Especially when it involves a topic I am passionate about like the Bible and theology. I am also passionate for healthy marriages, therefore, I am motivated to present enrichment material in helpful ways. The role of the facilitator in the Prepare-Enrich Group Program cannot be underestimated. Not only must the facilitator be familiar with the material, they must present it in a way that best advances learning. I included video clips, stories, music for appropriate ambiance, and door prizes in the experience. Not

all of these items are essential, but when considering application in a given environment, the pedagogical style of the facilitator makes a difference on effectiveness.

Does solo teaching versus team teaching make a difference in impact? My wife and I facilitated this group experience together. We team taught and modeled behaviors and skills in front of the participants before we asked them to practice them. I believe this is an important aspect of impact on couples. Not all pastors or marriage ministry leaders are able to do this. Not all spouses are interested, gifted, or called to participate at this level. I am blessed to have a wife that has this shared gifting, calling, and passion. When husband and wife are able to team teach the marriage experience, both participating spouses tend to relate more fully. There is also value in two perspectives on the material as it is presented. Moreover, the logistic and administrative burden is lightened through a team approach. If a pastor can facilitate with their spouse or raise up a mature couple who are gifted, called and passionate for marriage health, they will see the impact increase on the marital health within their congregation.

In addition, I find that having my wife partner with me allows her to express gifts that she may not be able to otherwise. This is a blessing to her as she honors God through her spiritual and natural gifts and it blesses others who may not have received to the same extent or in the same way. When a leader partners with a spouse in marriage ministry, there is a mutually beneficial reciprocal blessing.

Interestingly, “price point” plays a role in effective application. Price point would not only deal with what each couple pays monetarily, but also what they may be sacrificing in time, emotional energy, and familial commitments to be part of this experience. The Prepare-Enrich inventory cost thirty-five dollars for each couple. Financial cost beyond this fee can be figured easily by any ministry leader. Pastors must also consider the level of engagement that is reasonable for each couple. This is especially true for apprehensive couples who have yet to discover their areas of growth. They may feel the cost to their lives is too great to invest all that is being asked. Some couples are highly motivated due to the great pleasure that may be present in their marriage or great pain being experienced.

Finally, this program included couples from every stage. Premarital, enrichment, crisis, and remarriage couples were represented in the class. In addition, these same couples also represented vitalized, harmonious, conventional, conflicted, and devitalized couples. I was encouraged that this diversity was represented and that the measurable impact was realized. It is not necessary to divide couples according to type or stage for this program. Although, there are some interesting questions that we can learn from. How would a class be the same or different that is exclusive to a specific stage or type? Would premarital couples benefit more from having a class just for them or does having married couples involved enhance their experience? Is there a limit of crisis or conflicted/devitalized couples that a group program can handle due to the energy that they require? Community is a beneficial learning environment and the pastor or ministry leader must consider these community dynamics.

## **Further Study**

Following this project I would like to offer this group experience on a regular basis. It would be interesting to see what the impact on Orange Friends Church in the long term as this experience becomes part of the DNA of this local community. I would like to see the effect upon the church's ability to surface new marriage leaders and mentors. How would an ongoing stream of model couples for marriage ministry affect the life of the local church?

This class would also make an effective evangelistic tool to the surrounding community. What are the best practices for marriage ministry evangelism? How does the curriculum need to change in light of the expressed focus of evangelism? It seems to make sense that raising up mentor couples for discipleship would precede using this group program as an outreach to the community. In addition, how can Orange Friends Church best network with other local and denominational churches for the highest impact?

There are also a number of opportunities for continued research. One of the primary areas would be a longitudinal study with the original participants from this project. How has their relationship grown? Which couples are continuing to use the skills and habits taught in the original course? Depending on whether they have continued in these habits, what would be their couple typology? Would the original group benefit from a refresher experience? These questions and more would be appropriate for a study of the original couples over a long period of time.

The Prepare-Enrich Group Program uses a prescribed curriculum with some flexibility on issues such as number of meetings and the use of particular elements. It may be useful to learn of the impact the Prepare-Enrich assessment would have if inserted into another quality marriage enrichment and/or premarital curriculum. It should prove to be universal in nature. This inventory has already demonstrated to be applicable across cultures and ethnic groups. It stands to reason that it would be useful in many settings with any number of follow-up applications. Another researcher could produce a project using another delivery platform.

### **Personal Goals**

In completing this project, it was my hope that I would realize the following personal goals:

1. After completing this project, I anticipated that I would know the best practices for marriage enrichment in the context of the church.
2. After completing this project, I anticipated that I would be able to effectively train relationship professionals in the Prepare-Enrich Group Program.
3. After completing this project, I anticipated that I would be able to effectively facilitate the Prepare-Enrich Group Program in various contexts for premarital and marital couples.
4. After completing this project, I anticipated that I would be more acutely attuned to the relationship needs of couples.

5. After completing this project, I anticipated that I would have matured in my understanding of the sovereign transformational power of God over marital relationships.

#### Goal One: Know Best Practices for Marriage Enrichment

Although I had a good foundation coming into the project, I gained greater understanding of what may or may not work in the local church context for marriage enrichment. There are a vast number of resources being produced each year on the topic of marriage health and vitality. I have read many of those resources to date. What I discovered is that there are many people who are repeating the same suggestions for practitioners. There is truly nothing new under the sun. Yet, there are a few new approaches that connect with couples better than before.

However, another aspect of discovery for me was in regards to the wealth of resources that are available to better understand and implement healthy marriage ministry. In addition to this, I gained a more complete understanding of the lay of the marriage health landscape. This is comparable to the discovery of how a concordance, Bible dictionary, and atlas of the Bible may work for a young Bible student. There is no need to memorize each of these valuable resources, but there is an importance in understanding how to find what you need when you need it.

I also recognized that in the face of abundance there remains a limitation of applicable resources for the vast majority of churches. The America church landscape is dominated by small churches, yet most of the programs and

structures for impacting marriages are geared toward churches with an abundance of resources. These limited resources could include volunteers, finances, or facilities. It has become a desire of my heart to see all churches gain the ability to impact marriages in a positive way. This is a place where I more clearly learned the value of collaboration with multiple churches and parachurch organizations. When it comes to marriage enrichment, we are truly better when we are working together than when we are working independently.

#### Goal Two: Effectively Train Others in the Prepare-Enrich Group Program

Prepare-Enrich is a resource that I had a great amount of experience and knowledge with previous to this project, but I had not facilitated this program with a group. This experience has given me a better understanding of navigating the dynamics of a group as it contrast with a conjoint session. There are enough differences and dynamics with a group application that demand special attention. I learned that it is not enough to understand the program as it has traditionally been administrated. This experience has better equipped me to train others in practical implementation of the group program.

In addition, as I train relationship professionals my effectiveness has increased through the credibility gained through this project. I train several people each year in the Prepare-Enrich tool. Each time I train, I highlight the application and benefits of the group program. I can, from experience, speak to how it works and its impact. This will also open up the door to return to some of the people I have trained over the years to encourage the use of the group

application of the material. I am especially eager to assist pastors who would benefit.

### Goal Three: Effectively Facilitate the Prepare-Enrich Group Program

My wife and I have taught marriage classes for the last several years. Facilitating a group in the Prepare-Enrich material was not a new experience. However, using individual relationship inventories for couples in a group session was a new experience. The dynamics are different. Experience pays off. The more I facilitate with the new structure, the more effective I become.

I learned of the challenges of timing as couples work through the practice of the skills. Each couple works at a different pace throughout each session. The trick is to move at a speed that includes people who work faster and people who need more time. I learned how to properly reveal assessment results to couples for optimal learning. Assessment results are not given to couples all at once. The results are used as a tool for self-discovery based on the topic for that particular session. There are specific techniques that are used in order to aid couples in this discovery process. I learned how to better balance sharing between couples versus sharing among couples. Many individuals are fearful of being too open with people outside of their marriage. In fact, fear of sharing can hinder someone from even participating in the experience. Therefore, careful attention must be paid by the facilitator as to how much to ask of participants to share publically versus privately with one's spouse. I want individuals to share freely and openly with their spouse, but I am not as concerned for them to share publically.

In addition, I have an increased motivation to use this tool in a group setting more frequently. My wife and I have met with many couples in conjoint sessions using this material. I have learned the value of impacting more couples through the group experience.

#### Goal Four: Acutely Attuned to the Needs of Couples

Similar to other goals, experience is the best teacher. Being more attuned to the relational health needs of couples feels like it is both Spirit-led and learned. It is true that the more I work with couples the more I hear the heart cries of the individual spouses and of the couple as one. The critical key remains that I must retain a pastor's heart for those who need grace and love, rather than more information and technique.

It also holds true that the more couples I work with the further examples and stories I can pull from to help additional couples. They are not alone. As I work in group settings with the Prepare-Enrich material, I am able to share instances that people can relate to and therefore be encouraged and emboldened in their marriage.

I have also learned that while every couple is the same, every couple is different. There are many common denominators with all married couples. There are also unique challenges and blessings with each couple. Being aware of this fact has aided in my ability to be better attuned to the health needs of couples.

## Goal Five: Deeper Understanding of God's Work with Couples

This goal seems to naturally flow out of goal four. For a pastor, being more acutely attuned with couples is not accomplished fully without the awareness of the transforming power of God in their lives. I tend to be more driven in personality. I tend to control, manipulate, and step out on my own. God is working on me daily. This project has stretched me in this area perhaps more than any other area. Specifically with couples, I cannot try to make couples do what I want, rather I must allow the Holy Spirit to work. When the practice of His presence is at work, couples are bullied less by a demanding pastor, they are manipulated less by a controlling pastor, they are loved more clearly by a transforming God.

As a result of this lesson, I have come to learn and implement a coaching technique with couples. This allows for God to move rather than for me to move in their lives. Whether in a conjoint or group session, questions can be used effectively for self-discovery and exposure to the Holy Spirit.

## Conclusion

I started this project off with proclaiming that the Church is a lifesaving station. I still believe, perhaps more than ever, that the Church is a center for triage. I believe that the Church is the place for the incomplete, the broken, and the dying to find wholeness, healing, and life. Many marriages in our midst are in need of what the church has to offer in Christ Jesus. Marriages are often

incomplete, broken, and dying. Yet, for various reasons, individual churches often struggle in their role as the medium that brings marital health and vitality.

I also shared that I was raised in a dysfunctional home. I grew up seeing and experiencing the effects of an unhealthy marriage. However, in the face of my dysfunctional background, Jesus Christ offered wholeness, hope, and healing. God then led me to work in youth ministry for the next several years. The longer I worked with adolescents, the more I recognized that many of the challenging issues that teenagers faced were directly related to the health of their parent's marriage. This was also my personal experience as I grew up. This realization has led me to invest in marriage health and vibrancy.

In chapter two, I brought up the story of Pastor Tom and his wife Sue who were struggling in their marriage secretly while they worked in a church that contained many struggling marriages as well. Therefore, the heart and passion of this project has centered on the desire to provide a medium of health and vitality for marriages in the context of the local church. Marriage and the church are valuable to God. He created both institutions to be conduits for redeemed relationships. Relationships that are mutually beneficial and reciprocal in nature. Churches are poised to have an impact on marriages; and marriages, when strong, can have an impact on the church.

APPENDIX 1

PROJECT PROPOSAL

ASHLAND THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IMPACTING MARITAL HEALTH THROUGH THE LOCAL CHURCH

A PROJECT PROPOSAL SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF ASHLAND THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

DAVID MARINE MABRY

ASHLAND, OHIO

DECEMBER 14, 2012

## **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this project is to impact the relationship health of participating married couples at Orange Friends Church through the Prepare-Enrich Group Program. The research question is: To what extent does the Prepare-Enrich Group Program impact the relationship health of select married couples at Orange Friends Church?

## **Overview**

The focus of this project is to impact the relationship health of participating couples at Orange Friends Church through the Prepare-Enrich Group Program. Specifically, this project will assist couples in clearly seeing the health status of their relationship and developing a healthy path forward. The Prepare-Enrich assessment tool will give couples a clear understanding of strength and growth areas, stressors, personality preferences, and couple and family issues. As the assessment results are delivered in a group format, rather than individually, the couples will discover the overall status of their relationship health, increase in practical communication, conflict resolution skills, in the level of satisfaction in their relationship, and will feel better equipped to continuously mature in the health of their relationship.

This project will seek to impact select couples through implementing the Prepare-Enrich group program. The Prepare-Enrich group program includes six sessions over six weeks. Couples will take an online assessment previous to participating in the program. Session curriculum provides a framework for the

results of the Prepare-Enrich couple assessment. Sessions will include facilitator instruction, group interaction, and one-on-one couple discussion. I will assess the impact on the relationship health of the participating couples through a pre-test and post-test of closed and open-ended questions on an agreement scale. Questions are based on the project goals.

### **Foundations**

Relational health and vibrancy is one of the pillars of transformation in Christ Jesus. I have experienced this in my own life and have seen this as a critical truth in my vocational path within the church.

Relational health is foundational to our faith and practice. This is not only true in our working relationships and friendships, but is especially true for our familial connections. Marriage health and vitality is at the center of the family unit. The level of health in this relationship impacts every other relationship.

I have found in my journey with Christ that my relationships have been transformed as a result of spiritual formation. This is where the personal foundations for this project begin. In 1989, I took my first ministry position working with teenagers. For the next sixteen years, I worked in teen ministry. Over that time period, I was continually confronted with the fact that the marriages of the parents of the teenagers within my ministry had an impact upon their children.

Eventually, I ended up working directly with marriages through an organization called The Marriage Resource Center of Miami Valley in Springfield, Ohio. I began to experience and see the impact on relationship health through

proactive intervention with couples at all stages of development. My wife and I were trained in relationship education and marriage enrichment systems and tools. We then began to teach and train couples and other marriage ministry leaders in this material. We saw a positive difference with couples as we taught them new skills and coached them towards relational health and vibrancy.

While the organization's primary relationship education curriculum was called RINGS, the primary assessment and mentoring/coaching tool was Prepare-Enrich. During my tenure with the Marriage Resource Center of Miami Valley, I became a certified facilitator and seminar director for the Prepare-Enrich material. I have continued to train pastors, counselors, and relationship professionals in the material since being certified to do so in 2006. I also continue to use Prepare-Enrich with every couple that comes to me for pastoral counseling. I have found Prepare-Enrich to be effective in helping couples move towards greater relational health. It is also beneficial for facilitators, who are given a clearer understanding of the couples they are working with and the path to guide them on towards greater health.

The Prepare-Enrich program has primarily been facilitated with individual couples. In 2012, the organization launched a new group-based format. Since I have been effectively training professionals and successfully using the material with individual couples, I was interested in the opportunity to have a wider impact by taking several couples simultaneously through the program.

My personal foundations include experience and training in marriage ministry, but my strongest foundation lies in the belief that Jesus Christ

transforms individuals and relationships. We have a relational God. We have been called to a relational church. Each of us is given families with whom to relate. In the midst of these relationships, God provides redemption, restoration, healing, joy, fruit, and prosperity. Therefore, the church has, as its privilege, the ministry of relational healing for marriages.

### Biblical Foundation

The New Mandate, as it is called, found in John 13:34-35, is a call to love one another as Christ has loved us. This command is best understood as a call to a covenant, to mutually beneficial reciprocal relationships, and to follow the example of Christ. It is my conclusion that when a specific marriage reflects on and applies this understanding, better relational health results.

The command to love one another is set in the Gospel according to John. Chapters 13-17 make up what is known as the Farewell Discourse that was delivered by Jesus in the Upper Room on the night He was arrested. The discourse begins with an introduction of vv.31-38 (Brown 1970, 596-97). Previous to this, Jesus had washed the disciples' feet and challenged them to also wash one another's feet. He spoke of His betrayer and revealed Judas to be this person. Upon being exposed, Judas made a quick exit. Jesus then shared with the remaining disciples about His glorification and their impending life without his physical presence. Jesus then shared the central message of His extended remarks: love one another as I have loved you. This message is clarified by Christ as an indication or evidence of discipleship (Moloney 2005, 11-13). The New Commandment was shared by Christ in an environment that was

emotionally confusing and extremely difficult for the disciples. This command provided relational clarity in the midst of discomfort and conflict.

Therefore, it is safe to say that the new command to love one another was given in the midst of disciples who were experiencing fear, doubt, struggle and relational uncertainty. In addition to this, the self-interest of the disciples was competing with their Lord's command to love one another. This band of disciples was dealing with conflict at many levels; in many ways at this moment. Therefore, the passage not only takes on a declarative posture, but we can also read a message of comfort (Parsenios 2002, 218, 221, 231).

### *Redemptive Relationships*

As we have seen, we are commanded to love one another in the midst of conflict and crisis and in the face of our own self-interest. This is the context of the new mandate, and it is the context for marriages. Conflict, crisis, disappointment, self-interest, and ignorance are areas of unhealthy existence that can be touched by the redeeming nature of the new command. This is biblically infused transformation for the living of redemptive relationships.

Redemptive relationships, which are relationships that are transformed through the New Mandate, turn up throughout scripture. Specifically, the gospel of John carries the motif of love infusing and resulting from redemptive relationships. For example, Mary washed Jesus' feet with perfume, which gave the disciples a glimpse of the love He was asking them to exhibit and embody (John 12). This type of love was revolutionary in the context of the world in which Jesus lived (Belsterling 2006, 82). It was revolutionary due to its parallels with a

covenantal relationship, its reciprocal nature (giving and receiving love), and the fixture of Jesus as the primary model (Chennattu 2006, 97).

### The Covenant Relationship

Chennattu wrote at length on the nature of the new covenant within the Gospel of John and, more specifically, with the New Mandate. "There is no better metaphor than the OT covenant relationship to describe this love and communion that should exist among the disciples, between the disciples and Jesus, and between Jesus and the Father" (Chennattu 2006, 98). Earlier, we discussed the conciliatory nature that the Farewell Discourse has, and we can also say that it contains a covenant discourse as well. This is seen through a "covenant relationship [that] is implied by both the covenant command and the covenant sign: love for one another (13:34-35)" (Chennattu 2006, 83). This command implies covenant. Just as, in the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments were to be observed by Israel a designation of being God's chosen people, this New Commandment is given whereby they will be known as the disciples of Christ (Brown 1970, 612).

God's record of making covenant with humankind is well documented in scripture. Therefore, the New Mandate carries with it a covenantal relationship that binds us to God and to one another. As Chennattu states, "The biblical metaphor of covenant . . . signifies and implies a binding relationship based on commitment" (Chennattu 2006, 50-51).

A Christian marriage is a covenant relationship. The nature of a covenant conveys a much stronger message and commitment than the average contract or agreement. We would do well to educate and inform couples of this as clearly as possible when they enter into this agreement with one another and with God. The act of obedience by loving one another in a covenantal way builds up of the relationship between the disciple and God (Parsenios 2002, 226):

The best way of expressing our love for God and keeping his commandments is by loving fellow humans. It is in this context that we understand the command "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18). Sharing life with one's covenant partner is very essential to a covenant relationship. The life that the individuals hold is not private property, but something common, which has to be shared with others. In brief, keeping the commandments, loving and sharing the life with others, are intrinsic to the nature of a covenant relationship. (Chennattu 2006, 65)

This New Mandate binds Christian couples through the peaks and valleys that a normal relationship endures.

The understanding of love in the first century Mediterranean world was different than in contemporary America. To love one another in the way that Jesus has commanded requires a mutually edifying reciprocal relationship. It speaks of loyalty, value, and reliability fleshed out within the relationship (Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998, 228). Reciprocal relationships seek to console, serve, care for and understand the needs of the other disciple. In so doing, each person involved in this redeemed relationship is standing in the stead of the love of Jesus, who is not physically present (Brown 1970, 614).

In the New Mandate, Jesus calls married couples to be aware of the needs and personality of their spouse so that they can intelligently love one

another. Mutually beneficial reciprocal relationships express loyalty as a result of loving awareness.

Love is the central command in this passage, and this love is shown most clearly through the death and resurrection of Christ (Morris 1995, 560). Jesus has loved the disciples and shown them the full extent of his love (foot washing) and will love them through the cross. Therefore, they are to love one another (Morris 1995, 562). As we digest scripture, the example of Jesus to His disciples becomes our example as well. Raymond Brown says that John 13:34 could be rendered, "I have loved you in order that you also love one another" (Brown 1970, 607). Once again, although this is an old command (Lev. 19:18) the newness is the call to mimic with one another the expressed love that Christ exhibited (Morris 1995, 562).

As we read John 13:34-35 for instruction, we also must read it as a workable model. Couples may begin to unpack the New Command with questions like: How did Jesus love? What does it mean to wash the feet of my spouse? What does it mean for me to lay down my life for another? With Jesus as our mentor and model, we may act in confident obedience towards greater and more effective love for those closest to us.

### *Thinking Biblically*

The exploration of the New Mandate leads to passages and verses that may be relevant to the discussion. The New Testament includes several other "one another" verses as well as numerous verses on the theme of love. Specifically, a few of the key "one another" verses for marriage health and vitality

include: serve one another - John 13:14, edify one another (healthy communication) - 1 Thessalonians 5:11, have peace with one another (conflict resolution) - Romans 12:16; 14:13.

In the Farewell Discourse, Jesus talks of loving “one another” not only in John 13:34-35 but also in John 15. This offers expanded insight into the command. In this passage, Jesus exhorts His disciples to remain faithful, obey His commands, be sacrificial in their love, and bear fruit. First Corinthians 13 is the standard chapter Christians go to when they want to get a snapshot of the subject of love. A serious study of both this passage and John 15:9-17, with the foundation and view of mutually beneficial reciprocal love, provides the knowledge and wisdom needed to move towards redemptive relationships.

### Theological Foundation

A Biblical foundation provides a solid footing for health relationships within the marital context. Yet, we must go further and consider the theological implications of our biblical understanding. Therefore, exploration of ecclesiology, pneumatology, and soteriology will provide further clarity for a beneficial theology of marital relationships.

#### *Ecclesiology*

We begin this project with the presupposition that the context for the married couples involved is the body of Christ and that the marriage unit is a foundational relationship within the local church. With this in mind, we recognize that the church is often known by its functional aspects. If one were to ask what

the church is, the natural answer would include: a gathered body of believers, a worshipping community, an institution of proclamation, a group of Christ-followers serving this world in the name of their leader. Thinking in terms of the pragmatic will give us an adequate picture of the whole. There are specific functions that best point to the necessity of relational harmony as a key aspect of the church's existence and, therefore, to marital health. These functions serve as an expression and outlet for relational harmony and as a sign and symbol of the healthy life of the body of Christ.

The Lord's Supper, which according to Stanley Grenz is one of the premier sacraments above the other options, is an act of commitment to God and His church (Grenz 1994, 520). It is a primary sign and symbol of reconciliation, love, and God's activity among us. Therefore, it stands to reason, as the church participates in this sign of bread and wine, we should be attentive to the relational aspects of the act. Participation in the Lord's Supper calls for an evaluation of unity with one another in Christ (Vanhoozer 2005, 411).

The preaching of the Word is the key mark of Protestant understanding of the Church (Oden 1992, 299). It is the gospel of reconciliation and love. It speaks as a means of grace, healing for the soul, and nourishment for the poor and weak (Bloesch 1998, 72). In short, it is a primary means of spiritual formation. A Pietistic point of view regards the role of the Bible and teaching as spiritual formation which speaks salvation and nourishment to believers for a healthy community life with others and with God (Grenz 1994, 389). The Word, when preached to believers in encouragement and support of spiritual formation,

delivers a message that focuses primarily on relational health. In light of this focus, a more holistic approach to spiritual formation seeks to have a teacher of information and a preacher of transformation. Transformation should be primary in nature for relational harmony. To ignore a community-based transformational spiritual formation is to grieve and quench the Spirit of God, which ultimately disrupts the harmony of the church (Bloesch 1998, 84).

The Communion of the Saints is a recurrent theme in the New Testament. It expresses life together with fellow believers for this life and the life to come. The full picture of the theology of the Communion of the Saints is connected to the present age with incomplete knowledge and the age to come with its fuller knowledge. In the midst of this are relationships that are and will be improving and growing, one with another. We are called to this communion. We are to be active in this communion. (Oden 1992, 464-465). Faith in God through Christ Jesus draws us towards one another in community life rather than the lonesome travails of a pilgrim. Relational health within the marriage unit should reflect this Communion of the Saints.

The final function of the church to be considered as a foundation for marital relationship health is that of the Pastoral role. Pastors have a tremendous responsibility with regard to relational harmony. If pastors are not relationally healthy, then the church's opportunity for growth and success are impacted. The pastoral roles of teacher, model, and mediator contribute to marriage health (Boyatzis, Goleman and Mckee 2002, 39). A pastor's role may be fulfilled through the functions of the office, namely, preaching, teaching,

leading worship, and evangelism; but his ultimate call is to prepare God's people for works of service (Ephesians 4:12) (Grenz 1994, 563). In so doing, the pastor helps to shape the relational health of the congregation so that the people of a particular fellowship are effective in their call to do works of service. Stanley Grenz summarizes this well when he states, "Fundamentally, the pastoral office is to facilitate the well-functioning of the community. To this end, the pastor keeps before the members the vision of the community ideal, the design of God toward which the local fellowship directs its energies" (Grenz 1994, 563).

### *Pneumatology*

Foundational to Christian belief is the concept of the Trinity. We worship one God in three persons. Each person of the Godhead has a specific role and characteristic. Included in the role of the Holy Spirit is to be the bond between the Father and the Son. Love is the fundamental essence of this Trinitarian relationship (Grenz 1994, 71-72). Stanley Grenz effectively draws out the implications of this for believers when he writes the following:

At the heart of the Christian understanding of God is the declaration that God is triune – Father, Son, and Spirit. This means that in his eternal essence the one God is a social reality, the social Trinity. Because God is the social Trinity, a plurality in unity, the ideal for humankind does not focus on solitary persons, but on persons-in-community. God intends that we reflect his nature in our lives. This is only possible, however, as we move out of our isolation and into relationships with others. The ethical life, therefore, is the life-in-relationship, or the life-in-community. (Grenz 1994, 76)

Relational Harmony is modeled for believers in the Trinity. The character of the God who made us in His image is that of unity. Therefore, we are called to exhibit this harmonious lifestyle with one another both in action and in our very essence.

Active body life can be seen within the activity of the Holy Spirit. Erickson reminds us that the Holy Spirit gives life, power, unity, sensitivity to the Lord's leading, guidance into truth, gifts to serve, purity and holiness (Erickson 1996, 1039-1041). As the Holy Spirit imparts these gifts, we respond in community life. Each activity of the Spirit breathes health and life into the church. Without our submission to and engagement with the working of the Holy Spirit, we are a dysfunctional people.

Therefore, due to the relational nature of God, the engaging role of the Holy Spirit, and our active response to the movement of the Spirit, we can expect marriages to have a need for and growth in relational health and harmony.

### *Soteriology*

Our doctrine of the human constitution relates to human interaction. When we comprehend our constitution, we can better understand ourselves and our relationship one to another (Erickson 1996, 456-462). We are the created of God. We are each created as diverse beings but remain unified as one. Erickson offers an understanding of our human constitution as "conditional unity" (Erickson 1996, 536-439). Our present state is temporary and we will be complete at the resurrection. We are affected in every aspect of our lives by the curse of sin. Therefore, our redemption is necessary for relational wholeness.

We are social beings and created for social interaction (Erickson 1996, 470). Sin is not just failure, or falling short, or missing the mark but it also entails a disruption of community both with God and with others (Grenz 1994, 186-187). Sin within the world directly affects our relationships with others through self-centered competition, the inability or lack of desire to empathize with others, the rejection and disrespect of authority, and the inability to love others (Erickson 1996, 618-619). These are all marks of the influence of sin on our relational world.

Therefore, God interceded in the world to redeem corrupted creation. This redemptive work through Jesus Christ united us to God and with one another. Specifically, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ provides an opportunity for the unity of all who are believers in Him, both in spiritual reality and practice (Oden 1992, 211).

“Relational theology” is concerned with the effects of sin on interpersonal relationships (Erickson 1996, 889). This view holds that individuals are “deficient” in relationships and that there is a “fundamental lack of harmony” where healthy community should be (Erickson 1996, 889). In light of this view, we can now address relational harmony as a result of holiness. This is our relationship with one another, set apart, as a by-product of the redemptive work of God. Our relationship with one another requires the intercession of the redemptive work of God through Jesus Christ in order for us to experience and share sanctification and holiness. Further, then, the health of marriages is influenced by the regenerating and sanctifying work God has done for His people.

## Historical Foundation

George Fox was the founder of the Society of Friends, or Quakers, with which Orange Friends Church is affiliated. He lived much of his life as a single man who was focused on sharing the gospel. He did not marry until he reached his mid-forties. It was at that time that he married Margaret Fell, who, being in her fifties, had been widowed for several years. Margaret had already been active in the Quaker movement, and after marrying George, she continued as a partner in ministry, becoming known as the mother of the Friends movement (Williams 1962, 48-51). George and Margaret Fell Fox led by example. They believed firmly in the message they were carrying and the movement that they were leading. They endured hardship and victories for the sake of Christ. They also enjoyed simple days in the company of one another (Williams 1962, 51). This is the historical foundation for the theology of marriage in the Friends Church. This is a foundation of simple, yet profound love and commitment. This is a commitment to the call of Christ and to one another.

This specific theology of marriage reminds me of the partnership between Priscilla and Aquila, mentioned in the book of Acts. In Acts 18 we learn that this married couple, who were Christ followers, were also business partners. They supported the ministry of Paul and they participated in teaching and evangelism (Acts 18:2, 18, 26). Many married couples between the time of Priscilla and Aquila and the time of George and Margaret Fox are models for relational health and ministry impact simultaneously. It is with this understanding that we can

affirm that two are better than one. Furthermore, we add that two together in relational health are better than two at odds in relational dysfunction.

Worship in the Quaker tradition is simple. Although this is not the specific practice of most Friends Churches today, silent worship, or worship based on “Holy Obedience”, is a practical application of the overarching theology of simplicity (Trueblood 1966, 88). This historically held theology impacts every area of faith and practice, including special ceremonies like weddings and special relationships, like marriages. Quakers married in community, without clergy participation, but rather, with the community “officiating” and affirming the union of the man and woman (Trueblood 1966, 102-103). The marriage relationship was so valued by the community that a simple ceremony affirmed the importance of relational health lived in the context of an accountable, Spirit-led body of believers.

Two other historical attributes impact the foundational stance for relationship health. Quakers have historically held a strong peace and justice testimony. The peace testimony has been present since the founding of the movement (Trueblood 1966, 187). This has played out primarily in the call for the abolition of war, but the heart of the matter has always been a call for the practice of relational health through peaceful resolution and conflict management. George Fox wrote in response to challengers of this testimony:

Our principle is and our practices have always been to seek peace and ensue it and to follow after righteousness and the knowledge of God, seeking the good and welfare and doing that which tends to the peace of all. . . . (Vipont 1977, 81)

Therefore, the application of a peace testimony has been at work with conflict between nations as well as familial relationships.

The famous Quaker abolitionist, John Woolman, was steadfast in his work to seek justice for the enslaved. His work included a testimony for the value of the marriage of the enslaved. He wrote emphatically that slaves who were married should not be separated from one another. He further called for the recognition of slave marriages (Woolman 1961, 58-59). This heart for justice for the enslaved was a reflection of the value and sanctity Quakers placed on all marriages.

Therefore, marriage health and vitality has been a constant value of the people called Quakers. These have been followers of Christ who have sought a genuine and direct experience with the living Christ. As a result of this personal encounter with God, Friends have been a people who seek to live out a primitive Christianity in faith and practice. In so doing, these people of simple faith have shown value in relational harmony with all, especially within the family unit.

### Contemporary Foundation

When addressing contemporary foundations, we will look at the benefits of marriage, a few key aspects of healthy marriages, and the most effective strategies used to help couples achieve health and growth.

A healthy marriage benefits the individuals in the relationship, their families, and society at large. On average, married people enjoy a healthier lifestyle, longer life, more satisfying sexual relationships, happiness, and increased wealth (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 18-19). In his book, *Why*

*Marriage Matters*, Glenn Stanton emphasized the importance of marriage by comparing married and unmarried individuals. He concluded that there are “broad differences in the areas of alcoholism, suicide, morbidity and mortality, mental health, self-reported happiness, stress, and general well-being” (Stanton 1997, 73). Those who are married benefit greatly, while those who are never married, single-divorced, or widowed show higher levels of unhealthy attributes and behaviors. Furthermore, families with two-parent married homes tend to have children who are more successful academically, are involved with less risky behaviors, and exhibit emotional health. Children without this type of environment have a higher probability of being raised in poverty and to have a lower quality of life (Olson, Olson-Sigg, Larson 2008, 19-20). Research has confirmed time and time again that stable two-parent homes are beneficial to the larger family unit, particularly children. Healthy marriages make healthy communities. The inverse would be true as well. Simply stated, “As marriage weakens, the costs are borne not only by individual children and families but by all...” (Waite and Gallagher 2000, 186). Glenn Stanton summarizes his assessment of the research on the importance of marriage for society by saying:

Therefore, it is in our society’s best interest to do what it can to value and encourage marriage and have our community’s mediating structures work to strengthen marriage on a family-by-family basis. The benefit of marriage for children is even more pronounced.... A culture wise enough to favor marriage... will reap the benefits of citizens who enjoy healthy, strong, happy, sound, productive, and long-lived lives. (Stanton 1997, 95)

Therefore, healthy marriages are important for the life of the individuals, families and society at large.

Foundational to this project is an understanding of what makes a healthy marriage. There are many important habits, skills, attitudes, and understandings, but for our purposes, I will highlight a few of the essential elements. The following is not exhaustive, but is adequate. Key attributes of relationship health includes positive communication skills, conflict resolution skills, feelings of satisfaction, and a mutually beneficial reciprocal relationship.

Communication and conflict resolution skills are at the core of thriving marriages (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 22-23). Conflict resolution and communication work closely together. Both skills involve seeking to understand the viewpoint of the other person in the marriage, increasing effort on behaviors that may not feel natural, and the ability to be flexible for a mutually beneficial solution. Increased communication skills allow individuals in a marriage to hear, be heard, understand, and be understood. We often times cannot predict our partners thinking or feelings. In fact, research shows that couples can only predict their partner's view of marriage 25 percent of the time (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 8). Increased communication skills will increase the health of the marriage.

The ability to resolve conflict in a positive way is another key skill for marital health and vibrancy. Unfortunately, although conflict is present in every marriage, many couples avoid conflict when it arises (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 59). Couples may have a natural inclination to avoid conflict, but those marriages that learn conflict resolution skills are much happier (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 70).

Couples who are thriving indicate higher levels of satisfaction. Many positive habits may lead a couple towards greater levels of satisfaction. One such habit is the ability to identify strengths and areas of growth, yet married couples are less likely to see their strengths clearly when they are facing challenges in their relationship (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 9-10). Therefore, satisfaction grows as couples clearly see areas of growth and identify strengths.

Finally, the understanding of shared life together and living for one another plays an important role in marital vibrancy. This is particularly challenging in our individualistic, postmodern culture (Cherlin 2009, 192-193). Habits of many couples lead to self-preservation and self-focus. Couples must form the habit of purposeful, mutually beneficial reciprocal relationships. These marriages occur when each individual is mutually attentive to the needs and concerns of their partner and works at speaking into those needs. This attitude and behavior exhibits a high level of commitment, happiness, and satisfaction.

There are best practices that the church, marriage advocates, and couples can engage to help couples move toward relationship health. These include, but are not limited to, premarital education, marriage education, marriage coaching, and marriage mentoring. The focus of this project is how best practices may be administered within the context of the local church. I would agree with those that advocate for the faith community to be on the forefront of marriage strengthening and health. The Church is “uniquely positioned and individually commissioned to care for the cultural and domestic well-being of marriage” (Stanton 1997, 172-

173). Therefore, churches should strive to offer thorough marriage preparation and enrichment like the Prepare-Enrich program. Investment in training clergy and marriage mentors to facilitate this program with every couple wishing to marry within their church context could increase marital satisfaction and reduce the divorce rate with these couples by up to 30% (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 6). Furthermore, there can be a significant impact with married couples that may be facing crisis or simply needing enrichment (Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson 2008, 7).

Coaching and mentoring places a trained individual or couple with a couple who is seeking growth. Often times support materials, skill development, and listening techniques are implemented with the couple in need with success. In fact, using mentoring or coaching with the Prepare-Enrich tool has shown to increase the impact upon marriages (Wages and Darling 2004, 103). Therefore, a coaching or mentoring strategy can be an effective practice.

Relationship education is often times implemented in a group setting with a facilitator. Participation is couples-centered rather than individualistic.

Participants in this format can represent all levels of relationship health and stages. Relationship education programs have been shown to be beneficial for couples who are struggling with their relationship vitality as well as those who have a healthy status (DeMaria 2005, 242).

This project is based on the foundation that healthy marriage is important to individuals, families, and communities. Furthermore, healthy status is understood to include communication, conflict resolution, satisfaction, and

mutually beneficial reciprocal relational attitude and practice. The church can help couples achieve higher levels of health through relationship education, and coaching and mentoring with the support and assistance of an assessment tool like Prepare-Enrich.

### **Context**

This project will be implemented through the marriage ministry at Orange Friends Church. Therefore, the participants will be married couples who are regular attendees of Orange Friends Church, attendees of other churches surrounding Orange Friends Church, and couples who are not regularly attending any church at this time. All of the married couples involved will represent all levels of marriage health. Some of the couples may be conflicted or devitalized in their relationship and others may have a harmonious or vitalized marriage. No matter what their relationship status, the couples participating will have room for growth and development. Growth and development with couples will influence the congregation and community that they are involved in. This is why the select couples and Orange Friends Church need this program at this time.

Like most churches, Orange Friends Church cares for the health of marriages and its ability to help relationships inside and outside of the church. This church's hope is to offer assistance towards healthier marriages and a clear gospel message for participants who are not part of a church home yet. It is also a value of the marriage ministry of this church to serve other churches through ministries that build relational health between couples within their congregations.

Presently, the marriage ministry at Orange Friends Church is underdeveloped. The church includes about one hundred regular attending adults. Out of this number, leadership for ministry that is focused on marriage health has been void. My wife and I have been the sole champions for this effort in addition to our work in many other areas within the church that are in need of development. Therefore, efforts like the Prepare-Enrich group program will contribute not only toward healthy marriages, but, it is our hope, that it also will be a conduit for leadership development and vision for expanded marriage ministry.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Prepare-Enrich (P/E)** – This is a scientifically validated relationship inventory and couples assessment tool which is used as a foundational program for premarital counseling, marriage enrichment, couples therapy, marriage mentoring and marriage education (Knutson and Olson 2003, 530).

**Marriage Education/Enrichment** – Marriage education and enrichment are programmatic opportunities for individuals and/or couples that are intended to educate, inform, and enrich the individuals or couples in their marriage within a group context (Hawkins and VanDenBerghe 2014, 8).

**Vitalized** – Couples who score significantly high on the P/E assessment indicate high relationship health and are considered vitalized. Typically, couples in this category are most satisfied with their relationship and are skilled in communication and conflict resolution (Larson, Olson and Olson-Sigg 2008, 24-28; Knutson and Olson 2003, 542).

**Harmonious** – Couples who score moderately high on the P/E assessment indicate moderate to high relationship health and are considered harmonious. Typically, couples in this category have high levels of satisfaction in many areas of their relationship (Larson, Olson and Olson-Sigg 2008, 24-28; Knutson and Olson 2003, 542).

**Conventional** – Couples who score moderate on the P/E assessment indicate moderate relationship health and are considered conventional. Typically, couples in this category are often highly committed to one another, but lack skills in communication and conflict resolution (Larson, Olson and Olson-Sigg 2008, 24-28; Knutson and Olson 2003, 542).

**Conflicted** – Couples who score moderately low on the P/E assessment indicate moderate-to-poor relationship health and are considered conflicted. Typically, couples in this category have lower satisfaction and often struggle in many areas of their relationship (Larson, Olson and Olson-Sigg 2008, 24-28; Knutson and Olson 2003, 542).

**Devitalized** – Couples who score significantly low on the P/E assessment indicate poor relationship health and are considered devitalized. Typically, couples in this category would have the lowest levels of satisfaction and have growth areas in almost every aspect of their relationship (Larson, Olson and Olson-Sigg 2008, 24-28; Knutson and Olson 2003, 542).

**Marriage Coaching** – An individual or a couple who adopts a strategy of marriage coaching will work with a couple towards achieving goals that relate to their marriage. This may include instruction, but often times the coach will enlist

exercises and discussion that lead the couple towards achieving goals related to greater relationship health (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 1801).

**Marriage Mentoring** – Typically marriage mentoring is facilitated by a mentor couple with a couple who is seeking guidance in marriage growth and wellness. Marriage mentoring will rely on the strategy of instruction and modeling from the mentor couple (Parrott and Parrott 2005, 19).

**Marriage Counseling** – Distinctive from coaching and mentoring, marriage counseling is facilitated by a trained, licensed, and certified counselor. Most often this is done with couples who have more critical relationship issues, emotional imbalance, or extremely unhealthy marriages that may carry complexities beyond the ability of marriage mentors or coaches (Woolverton and Woolverton 2012, 1801).

### **Project Goals**

The purpose of this project is to impact the relationship health of participating married couples at Orange Friends Church through the Prepare-Enrich Group Program. The research question is: To what extent does the Prepare-Enrich Group Program impact the relationship health of select married couples at Orange Friends Church?

The goals for this project are:

1. To impact participating couples through the discovery of the status of their relationship health.

2. To impact participating individuals through the discovery of how they may be contributing towards the status of the relationship health of their marriage.
3. To impact participating couples through the increase of practical communication skills.
4. To impact participating couples through the increase of practical conflict resolution skills.
5. To impact participating couples through the increase of the level of satisfaction in their relationship.
6. To impact participating couple's feelings of being better equipped to continuously mature in the health of their relationship.

### **Design, Procedure, and Assessment**

The purpose of this project is to impact the relationship health of participating married couples at Orange Friends Church, Lewis Center, Ohio, through the Prepare-Enrich Group Program. The design of the program is a six session group experience covering various relationship topics. The weekly sessions will include an agenda of the Prepare-Enrich curriculum designed for a group of couples. This material will be led by my wife and myself, who are trained and certified facilitators with Prepare-Enrich. Couples will experience group discussion, teaching from the facilitators, couple-centered exercises, and suggestions for further application between sessions. The Prepare-Enrich experience rest on each couple taking a pre-session inventory that measures relationship health. Each individual will take the inventory online one week prior to the group experience. The inventories are then interpreted by the facilitators

and the results are disseminated throughout the program to customize each couples experience and to aid couples in learning and growing. This inventory will be administered the week following the six week program to measure growth.

Couples will be self-selected from those who are regular attendees at Orange Friends Church, attendees from other Lewis Center area churches, and couples in the community with no church affiliation. The sixty to ninety minute sessions will be held weekly on Wednesday evenings at Orange Friends Church in Lewis Center, Ohio.

Individuals will be given a pre-test of closed-ended questions based on the project goals at the first session. The participants will be given a post-test of the same questions and different open-ended questions at the end of the final session. The quantitative questions will be phrased as statements using an agreement scale with five choices from totally agree to totally disagree. These choices are paired with a number. The qualitative questions will be open-ended questions that request personal feedback. All assessments will be voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

### **Personal Goals**

I was raised in a dysfunctional home. I grew up seeing and experiencing the effects of an unhealthy marriage. I became a follower of Jesus Christ when I was a teenager. This was a transformational experience for me. In the face of my dysfunctional background, Jesus Christ offered wholeness, hope, and healing. During my late teen years, I felt a strong call into ministry. As a result of this call, God led me to work in youth ministry for the next several years. The longer I

worked with adolescents, the more I recognized that many of the challenging issues that teenagers faced were directly related to the health of their parent's marriage. This was also my personal experience as I grew up. This realization has led me to invest in marriage health and vibrancy. The last several years I have been involved with marriage ministry directly, as well as indirectly, through pastoral ministry. This has included the opportunity to be trained as a facilitator and a seminar director for Prepare- Enrich. Marriage health not only impacts the lives of children, but entire communities and the culture at large. I desire for all marriages to experience health and vibrancy. God has blessed me with the opportunity to speak into relationships that they may grow towards greater health.

To this end, my personal goals for this project are:

1. After completing this project, I anticipate that I will know the best practices for marriage enrichment in the context of the church. (knowledge)
2. After completing this project, I anticipate that I will be able to effectively train relationship professionals in the Prepare-Enrich group program. (skills)
3. After completing this project, I anticipate that I will be able to effectively facilitate the Prepare-Enrich group program in various contexts for premarital and marital couples. (skills)
4. After completing this project, I anticipate that I will practice at least two new habits for my own marriage health. (growth)

5. After completing this project, I anticipate that my wife and I will show evidence of maturing in our partnership in ministry with other couples through at least two tangible practices. (growth)

### **Calendar**

<u>Month</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Action</u>
October	2012	DM 914: Proposal seminar
December	2012	Project approval
January	2013	Attend DM 919: Writing seminar
February- March	2013	Prepare-Enrich Group Program
February- March	2013	Write Chapters 2-3, Assessment
April- May	2013	Write Chapters 4-5
June- July	2013	Write Chapters 6, 1
August	2013	First Draft submitted to advisor
September	2013	Final Draft of Final Paper
October	2013	Defense

### **Core Team**

**Advisor:**

Andrew J. O. Wright, Dmin, Pastor of New Carlisle Church of the Brethren, New Carlisle, Ohio.

**Field Consultant:**

Lavern Nissley, MA, Executive Director of The Marriage Resource Center- Miami Valley, Springfield, Ohio.

**Resource Persons:**

David H. Olson, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, Family Social Science, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN; Founder and CEO of Life Innovations.

Amy Olson-Siggs, MA, Life Innovations, Director of Communications

**Support Team**

Theresa Mabry, Spouse

Orange Friends Church Administrative Council

Orange Friends Church Pastoral Prayer Warriors

The support team will not meet formerly as a team but will serve their function in various ways. My wife, Theresa, will be an ongoing accountability, encouragement, and co-facilitator for the Prepare-Enrich group program. The Elders of Orange Friends Church make up the Administrative Council. This team meets monthly for the business of the church. I will be giving a report, sharing prayer requests, and receiving accountability at the monthly Administrative Council meetings. Every two weeks, I will be sending prayer requests and an update, via e-mail, to a select group of individuals who have agreed to pray for me in ministry and on this dissertation journey.

**Life Management Plan**

I understand that this process will add a tremendous amount of work and stress to an already busy schedule. In order to successfully navigate this season,

I will choose to practice healthy time management, relational management, and vocational management.

Time management includes setting aside one morning each week for research and writing. I also plan to integrate my pastoral responsibilities of teaching and training with issues surrounding this project. This will allow me to take an additional four hour block of time each week to work on topics surrounding this project. In addition to this weekly allotment of time, I will be taking time provided by the church I pastor to make progress on research and writing. Specifically, this will be three to five weeks to be used at my discretion throughout the dissertation process.

Relational management includes continued habits with family and friends in the midst of the increase in work load. I plan to have a date with my wife once a week, eating most evening meals with my wife and children, and blocking off a monthly social time with the intentionality of building existing friendships.

Vocational management includes bringing the church that I pastor along for the journey. The project will take place in the context of the church that I pastor. The impact of this project will have a direct effect on the marriages within this context. This will allow for this project to be a blessing rather than a strain on my vocational obligations. Allowing the church I pastor to be part of the journey also includes freely communicating what the status of the project may be, how they can pray for me, and, perhaps, how they may participate. I am hopeful that this partnering on the journey will encourage and inspire the people at Orange Friends Church.

## **Resources**

The Marriage Resource Center of Miami Valley

Life Innovations, Inc.

Grace and Truth Relationships

Better Marriages Conference for marriage and relationship educators, June 2013

National Healthy Marriage Resource Center

National Association for Relationship and Marriage Education (NARME)

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## APPENDIX 2

### PROJECT ASSESSMENT

Dear Class participants,

February 6, 2013

I am so appreciative for your involvement in the Prepare Enrich couples class. I also am grateful for your willingness to participate in the assessment of the effectiveness of this class through a short survey at the beginning of this six week experience and at the end of the final class. This survey will help me as I seek a greater understanding of how to help couples within a church context.

The results of this voluntary assessment are anonymous. Your open and honest responses will be very helpful.

Thank you again,

David M. Mabry

## Pre-test Assessment

**Gender:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Code** (inside flap of folder): \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions and Scale:** Please use the following scale to rate yourself. Circle the number that applies to you.

- |                        |                     |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1- Strongly Disagree   | 4- Slightly Agree   |
| 2- Moderately Disagree | 5- Moderately Agree |
| 3- Slightly Disagree   | 6- Strongly Agree   |

1. I know the strengths of my marriage.

1 2 3 4 5 6

2. I am highly motivated to do what it takes to see our marriage grow.

1 2 3 4 5 6

3. My partner is a good listener.

1 2 3 4 5 6

4. I am willing to do whatever it takes to improve our relationship.

1 2 3 4 5 6

5. I recognize my behaviors that may bring strength to our marriage.

1 2 3 4 5 6

6. We agree on the best way to resolve a disagreement in our relationship.

1 2 3 4 5 6

7. I am satisfied with the relationship I have with my partner.

1 2 3 4 5 6

8. I know what improvements are needed for my marriage.

1 2 3 4 5 6

9. My marital satisfaction has grown over the past six weeks.

1 2 3 4 5 6

10. I tend to avoid conflict with my partner.

1 2 3 4 5 6

11. I know the health status of my marriage.

1 2 3 4 5 6

12. I am satisfied with my partner's interest in improving our marriage.

1 2 3 4 5 6

13. My actions contribute to improving our marriage.

1 2 3 4 5 6

14. I can share my feelings with my partner at times of disagreement.

1 2 3 4 5 6

15. I recognize my behaviors that may cause our relationship to weaken.

1 2 3 4 5 6

16. I am satisfied with how we talk with each other in our marriage.

1 2 3 4 5 6

17. It is hard for me to ask my partner for what I want.

1 2 3 4 5 6

18. I am committed to making our marriage last a lifetime.

1 2 3 4 5 6

## Post-class Assessment

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Code: \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions and Scale:** Please use the following scale to rate yourself. Circle the number that applies to you.

- |                        |                     |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1- Strongly Disagree   | 4- Slightly Agree   |
| 2- Moderately Disagree | 5- Moderately Agree |
| 3- Slightly Disagree   | 6- Strongly Agree   |

1. I know the strengths of my marriage.

1 2 3 4 5 6

2. I am highly motivated to do what it takes to see our marriage grow.

1 2 3 4 5 6

3. My partner is a good listener.

1 2 3 4 5 6

4. I am willing to do whatever it takes to improve our relationship.

1 2 3 4 5 6

5. I recognize my behaviors that may bring strength to our marriage.

1 2 3 4 5 6

6. We agree on the best way to resolve a disagreement in our relationship.

1 2 3 4 5 6

7. I am satisfied with the relationship I have with my partner.

1 2 3 4 5 6

8. I know what improvements are needed for my marriage.

1 2 3 4 5 6

9. My marital satisfaction has grown over the past six weeks.

1 2 3 4 5 6

10. I tend to avoid conflict with my partner.

1 2 3 4 5 6

11. I know the health status of my marriage.

1 2 3 4 5 6

12. I am satisfied with my partner's interest in improving our marriage.

1 2 3 4 5 6

13. My actions contribute to improving our marriage.

1 2 3 4 5 6

14. I can share my feelings with my partner at times of disagreement.

1 2 3 4 5 6

15. I recognize my behaviors that may cause our relationship to weaken.

1 2 3 4 5 6

16. I am satisfied with how we talk with each other in our marriage.

1 2 3 4 5 6

17. It is hard for me to ask my partner for what I want.

1 2 3 4 5 6

18. I am committed to making our marriage last a lifetime.

1 2 3 4 5 6

19. What are one or two things that have helped you discover the health status of your marriage?

---

20. What are one or two things that have helped you discover how you may be affecting the health of your marriage?

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21. What are one or two skills that have been most helpful in increasing healthy communication in your marriage? Why?

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22. What are one or two skills that have been most helpful for resolving conflict in your marriage? Why?

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23. What are one or two things that would help you be more satisfied with your marriage? Why?

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24. What are one or two factors that keep you motivated towards ongoing improvement of your marriage?

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