

Learning to Love?

ON OUR WEDDING DAY I could have written everything I knew about marriage on the back of the menu. Bernie proposed to me a month after our first date, and we were married three months later. Two weeks after the wedding, we arrived at Andrews University. That first semester, Bernie took a class in Marriage and Family, and I went along for the ride. The class required us to attend two marriage retreats, a parenting seminar, and a family worship seminar, all within the first three months of our marriage. I remember going to a workshop on managing conflicts in marriage and wondering what all the fuss was about . . . I soon learned!

Those seminars were the best wedding gifts ever. They helped us develop a deep spiritual foundation for our relationship, inspiring us to serve as family ministries directors in England and eventually to study family therapy. I don't know how our relationship would be if we hadn't learned so much, because even now, there are days when it's very hard to put all those great skills into practice.

WHY RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION IS IMPORTANT

Marriage and parenting are the most challenging jobs. If we need a dozen lessons and a license to drive a car, how much more important to have pre-marital counseling and relationship skill building before we get married or have children! We'd never drive a car without servicing it regularly, yet many of us never think about "servicing" our marriages, a much more valuable and long-lasting resource. If I need 21 CEUs each year to maintain my professional registration, why not spend at least 21 hours learning how to improve my marriage? After all, what's more important than learning how to have the loving relationships that God wants for us?

RIPPLES OF LOVE . . .

We've seen powerful effects when ministerial couples make it a priority to nurture and grow their relationships:

- They experience more of God's love in their lives through the way they care for each other.



“So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover’s life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.”

Phil. 1:9, The Message

- Their marriages often become stronger, happier, and more resilient.
- Their parenting improves.
- Their children are more likely to flourish emotionally and learn vital relationship skills from their parents.
- The pastor is more likely to preach about healthy relationships to nurture the individuals and families in the congregation.
- The minister is more likely to have the courage, wisdom, empathy, and experience to help couples and families in the church who are facing challenges.
- The church is more likely to reach out to families in their community.

But when the minister’s marriage is struggling and unhappy, the couple, their family, and the families in their congregation and community are much less likely to have these positive experiences.

BUT MY SPOUSE ISN’T INTERESTED . . .

Even if your husband or wife would never read a book or go to a marriage seminar, you can learn simple skills to have a profound effect on your relationship. With prayer, love, wisdom, and the Holy Spirit, one spouse can transform a marriage through loving and positive persistence. Try exploring www.divorcebusting.com for some helpful ideas and resources, or read Michele Weiner-Davis’ book *The Divorce Remedy*.

LEARNING FROM OTHER MARRIAGES

Choose a marriage mentor. Find a ministerial couple who has been married at least ten years longer than you have, and ask them to mentor your marriage. They need to be able to pray with you; listen to your highs, lows, and challenges; talk honestly and openly about their own struggles; and share how they’ve nurtured their own relationship. Read *Mentoring Marriages* by Harry Benson and also share it with the couple you choose as mentors.



LEARNING FROM YOUR OWN MARRIAGE

If it's too difficult to get away for a weekend marriage retreat, and you don't have time to read or watch DVDs, these simple questions will help you grow your marriage right where you are. At the end of each day, ask these questions:

- What did I do or say that brought us closer together as a couple today? How can I do more of those things?
- What did I do or say that pushed us farther apart today? How can I do those things less? And what can I do to repair the damage I caused?
- What can I do tomorrow to help my spouse experience more of God's love through me?

DIY "HOME IMPROVEMENT" TOOLS

If you can't escape for a marriage retreat, try some of these "at home" ideas for improving your relationship:

DVD SERIES

- *The Marriage Course* is an excellent DVD series designed as an outreach ministry by British Christians. It's now available around the world and in several different languages (www.relationshipcentral.org/marriage-course).
- *Laugh Your Way to a Happy Marriage* is a DVD series by Mark Gungor, a U.S. pastor, family counselor, and stand-up comedian. Watch sample clips on Youtube to check whether his unique approach works for you. Even the most reluctant husband usually enjoys Mark's fun style.

BOOKS

Read books and listen to audio books when you're out and about:

- *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman
- *The Marriage Book* by Nicky and Sila Lee
- *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* by John Gottman

NAD Ministerial Association has produced a series of resources for ministerial couples and families. They include ideas, tips, and video discussion starters so that ministerial families can access help within their own home and schedule.

Go to www.nadministerial.org and click on "Family" and select "Sacred Family Circle." Choose from the following topics:

FINANCES

DEPRESSION

SURVIVING A MARRIAGE CRISIS

STRESS

PARENTING

FORGIVENESS

HEALTHY COMMUNICATION

FREEDOM FROM PORNOGRAPHY

MOVING

- *Fighting for Your Marriage* by Howard J. Markman, Scott M. Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg
- *Hold Me Tight* by Sue Johnson.

PODCASTS

Download and listen to marriage-building podcasts:

- *Care for the Family: The Marriage Challenge* podcasts (www.careforthefamily.org.uk/family-life/marriage-support/the-marriage-challenge)

INTERNET

Explore websites filled with marriage tips and ideas, downloads, and videos:

- GC Family Ministries website (www.adventist.family.org) and your local conference and division family ministries websites
- www.2-in-2-1.co.uk
- www.familylife.com
- www.thedatingdivas.com (for creative cheap dating ideas, printables, and a fun experience based on *The Five Love Languages*).

Karen Holford writes from Scotland, where she and Bernie enjoy learning how to grow their relationship into the marriage that God wants them to experience.