

# Marriage Enrichment Program Evaluation

*By Judith Balswick and Jack Balswick*

*In this article we review marital enrichment programs for the quality and research basis of material presented, adequacy of the leaders guide, processing of exercises, user friendliness for teaching and application, view of gender roles, and degree to which the program is integrated into a biblical/theological perspective. After considering the relative strengths and limitations of available programs, we conclude that different programs are useful at different times in a couple's life. It is important to offer a variety of enrichment programs and formats to build stronger marriages.*

Many church leaders are committed to devoting attention to pre-marital and marital programs to prepare their members for the challenges of married life. In the past, religious institutions did not spend much attention on helping couples learn how to live happily ever after in the life long, monogamous marriage they endorsed. The truth is, marriage takes a commitment that goes beyond romantic idealism. It's not a matter of just "doing what comes naturally" but teaching people the necessary skills to keep marriages vital and effective.

Marriage is a complex venture of meshing two unique individuals from unique family backgrounds into what they hope will be an effective, harmonious unit. So often, doing nothing means couples are on their own to learn the skills they need to build a solid marriage. Then, when a couple is in trouble, the best we do is refer them for therapy. Whereas research generally shows religiosity to be a deterrent to divorce, based on his telephone sample of over 7000 adults, Barna (2001) makes the rather startling report that born-again adults (27%) are just as likely to divorce as non-born-again adults (24%). Since 1986, according to Cornes (1993), most divorces in the United States take place by the seventh year of marriage. In light of these findings, it certainly makes sense to take proactive steps to assist marriages early on and throughout the marital life stages.

Churches can assist couples in developing skills and attitudes that will strengthen and sometimes save troubled marriages. Marriage is a lifelong vocation and couples will go through stresses and strain throughout their various life stages. Providing education and training can be one way the church supports and provides resources to enhance the health of their married members.

## **Marital Enrichment Program**

Given the differing format, focus, and nature of marital enrichment materials, we present these programs under three categories: First, marriage enrichment workshop formats include programmed materials for larger audiences and a focused time period (week-end retreat setting). For the most part, these materials include video-tape presentations, demonstration of skills and couple participation exercises. Second, small group books and workbooks are written for couple reflection, assessment and assignments in a small group setting. The third category of materials reviewed are those specifically written for couples to use in the privacy of their home. Whenever possible, we provide website information on the programs. We include in this article marriage enrichment programs particularly designed to assist the couple through practical assessment and skill development. Some marriage books, though not explicitly designed for workshop or group formats, could easily be adapted for a married couples' Sunday school class, a ten-week series or neighborhood study group on marriage. In this case, a leader would direct the couples to study a book chapter each week and lead a discussion of the materials. The couple exercises and assessments could either be done at home or during a specified time at the weekly meeting.

We watched more than 60 hours of video and reviewed over 2000 pages of books and instruction manuals. Initially, we were only going to evaluate marital enrichment programs that had a Christian orientation. However, we have included several well-known secular programs, believing these materials can be useful in the hands of a knowledgeable leader who can bring biblical/theological content to augment these materials. We have identified materials as Christian or secular in terms of the content and the author's orientation.

Specific criteria used to evaluate programs include:

1. over-all quality of the program determined by organization, attractiveness and comprehension;
2. adequacy of the leaders guide regarding instruction provided, organization, teaching aids, assessment instruments, and exercises;
3. written content in terms of information presented, skill development offered, and explanations given to support the ideas;
4. gender role orientation categorized as egalitarian, complementary or soft patriarchy (a suffering servant/spiritual leadership view of male headship as opposed to a power based authoritarian "hard patriarchy" view);
5. citation or reference made to research, social science and professional marital literature; and
6. use of biblical or theological integration in the materials.

At times, our judgment of quality was undoubtedly influenced by personal bias. Our personal bias is for egalitarian marriage with an emphasis on "giftedness," creative flexibility, mutual empowerment, and decision making. In addition, we believe the most effective marriage enrichment programs are those that integrate the best of social science literature with a practical and comprehensive biblical model of marriage.

In reference to gender role issues, our strategy was to indicate the position taken in a program, rather than comment on the position taken. The same is true when we evaluate the biblical/theological basis for the program, although at times we comment on the adequacy of the information. We also give some limited background information on the authors of a program when deemed useful.<sup>1</sup>

### **Marital Enrichment Workshop Format**

These enrichment programs are intended for a weekend, large groups, or audiences. Videotaped materials by the presenter(s) are shown to the audience to introduce the topic and explain the marital concepts. Volunteer couples in the video demonstrate the skills. The videotapes can be stopped at designated points during the session so couples can interact with each other about the concepts presented and practice the skills.

- ***Communication: Key to your Marriage, and Relationships that Work and Those that Don't***

This workshop is presented by H. Norman Wright, founder of Christian Marriage Enrichment. Dr. Wright has contributed 65 books on the field of marriage from a biblical perspective. These two videos are designed for marriage and pre-marital couples, respectively. The complete curriculum teaching kit can be used in marriage seminars but also in other formats like Sunday school class, retreats, or small group settings. The kit gives structure, an outline, time sequence and learning activities along with transparencies for teaching. Wright is relaxed, fun, and a good communicator in the videos. The couple's guide is most practical and includes couple assessment forms and reflection questions to evaluate the couple relationship and instruction on how to practice skills.

Wright makes some reference to relevant literature and liberally uses Bible verses to support his material. Male/female differences are discussed in terms of the tendency to do things according to gender scripts. He advocates servant leader attitudes in marital partners, finding men and women equal in every way except authority and responsibility. Husbands are to listen to their wives but it is the husband who bears the responsibility before God. Wright's material is readable, personal and clearly based on Scripture.

- ***Everything that Parents Should Teach, and Singles Should Know about How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk: The Way to Follow Your Heart Without Losing Your Mind***

This series, by John Van Epp of Partner Premarital Interpersonal Choices Training Program, includes

six videotapes, a discussion workbook, a Bible study and leader's guide. Van Epp explains his relationship attachment model and the five major principles of knowledge, trust, reliance, commitment and sex. He presents to a large audience but does not involve his audience in any demonstration or participation.

The format can vary, but generally the couple will listen to the tape to get a bird's eye view of the session topics and then complete the exercises while the tape is turned off. The Training workbook provides diagrams and overheads of the materials presented along with a set of questions for the participants.

No reference is given to social science research. Van Epp uses Bible verses to support his points of view and makes a valiant attempt to address a worthy topic, but we found this material somewhat confusing and uneven.

- ***Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples***
- ***Keeping the Love You Find: A Personal Guide***

Both are written by Harville Hendrix and based on his "Imago" concept of marriage. According to Hendrix, the picture in each spouse's mind of the ideal parent is that person's imago. After marriage, the spouse is expected to satisfy the yearnings and wounding of childhood and meet this ideal, inevitably bringing up marital disappointment and struggle. Becoming aware of the family of origin dynamics and unmet childhood needs gives each spouse a conscious and compassionate understanding of themselves and their spouse. Dealing with these dynamics brings personal and relational growth. The couple moves from romantic attraction to power struggle issues and hopefully into a conscious marriage.

There are prescribed exercises to help the couple develop a conscious marriage, i.e., the place where empathy for the partner and reaching beyond one's comfort zone to meet the spouse's need is a transforming experience. Training is provided for professionals to become certified to do these marriage workshops.

The *Guide for Couples Video Series* is an abridged version of the more extensive training workshop. The video includes didactic information given by Hendrix to the workshop audience, demonstration of the techniques with a volunteer couple, reflection on what happened, and careful instruction for couples to try the exercise in the privacy of their own home. The manual contains written exercises for the couple to complete, as well as guided visualization (audiotape) to get a couple ready for some of the exercises. There is on-screen instruction as well as detailed instruction in the manual.

This material could be used in a weekend or weekly format, in a group or at home. The video series, produced by Harville's wife, Helen Hunt, is engaging, personal and of high quality. Each couple has a workbook to follow along as they go through the tape one session at a time. Excellent, step-by-step instructions are given in terms of how to proceed. Actual couples used in the video demonstrations represent a cross-section in terms of culture, age, class, and marital problems. References are made to various developmental and social science theories.

No specific reference is made to gender, but an egalitarian relationship and love reciprocity are strongly emphasized. Mutual acceptance and respect is the theme. Although there is no specific biblical content or references to God in the Imago model, during the personal interviews in the video, Helen brings out the spiritual dimension that has been crucial to their journey as a married couple. Spiritual themes are not developed or incorporated into the materials, although the program's use of concepts such as unconditional love could easily be understood in light of God's love.

The program provides thorough information, helpful instruction, and an excellent video production. Safety is a requirement and couples are cautioned to seek a counselor to help them through more serious power issues. In summary, we found this material to be of the highest professional quality. Limitations include needing to "buy into" this theoretical framework of the marriage relationship and to integrate it with a biblical perspective.

- ***Living Love Series***

This series is a secular video series taught by seven leading professional marriage and family therapy experts; Richard Stuart, Bill and Carleen Glasser, Harville Hendrix, Michele Weiner-Davis, Pat Love and John Gray. Pat Love and Jon Carlson, marriage and family educators/therapists, serve as co-hosts to each presenter, along with a studio audience who interacts with and volunteer to demonstrate exercises led by the particular presenter(s). This effective format makes for a lively, fun presentation dealing with real issues of actual couples. Assessment questions addressing various aspects of marriage are asked throughout the presentations. Each presenter has his or her perspective, presenting didactic information as well as practical exercises for couples to do. The presenters serve as the facilitator when the couple is practicing an exercise, followed by group discussion of the couple's experience. The video has appropriate pause time to allow a couple to practice. Video topics include *Create a Positive Relationship* by Richard Stewart with sessions on Caring Days/Negotiation/Authority/Decision Making & Future Planning; *Make Right Choices* by Bill and Carleen Glasser with sessions on Solving circle/Basic needs/Seven deadly habits/Language of closeness/Choosing solutions; *Conscious Communication* by Harville Hendrix with sessions on Mirroring/Validating/ Commitment exercises; *Deepen Connection* by Gay and Kathlyn Hendricks with sessions on Acceptance/Commitment/Time for each other/Receiving and giving compliments; *Getting Unstuck* by Michelle Weiner-Davis with sessions on Defining love/Goal setting/Takes one to tango; *Creating Loving Sexuality* by Pat Love with sessions on Chemistry/Deepening/Beyond self-centeredness; and *Keeping Passion Alive* by John Gray with sessions on Venting/The feeling letter/Responsibility/Visualization.

Each presentation includes key components of the expert's experience and popular success in working with marriages. The studio audience is engaged in a series of practical exercises, giving the viewer an opportunity not only to listen to the ideas but to watch the exercises being demonstrated and then being given an opportunity to participate and practice. The leader of a small couples group or seminar can easily use the videotaped didactic information, stop the tape after the presenter offers his/her ideas, let viewers see a particular exercise being demonstrated and then do the exercise themselves. Taking time to discuss the experience, just as the studio audience shares their responses to a particular exercise, will enhance the group dynamics. These well-known presenters each have their own style and are very enthusiastic about how they use their material to enhance the marriage relationship.

Although each presenter refers to specific *research* supportive of her or his approach, there is little detail given. For the most part, gender is not a primary focus in this series but equity is seen as more important than equality, which can easily lead to score keeping. John Gray is the exception in that he wants couples to be aware of how gender stereotypes impact the relationship.

Since this is a secular series, there is no attempt made to bring in a spiritual or biblical dimension. The foundational tenet is for couples to give primacy to their relationship as a living unit that requires nurturing and attention. Differences and disagreements are normalized so spouses can work together on their conflicts. The series presents quality material on marriage enrichment; perhaps the leader can augment it with biblical concepts.

- ***Marriage on the Rock***

This resource includes a book, audiotape and videotape by pastor Jimmy Evans, founder of *Family & Marriage Today*. Although not specifically trained in psychology or marital and family therapy, he speaks authoritatively from biblical passages. He is an engaging speaker and uses his book as the foundation of his marriage principles. It's hard to recommend this program as enrichment since there are no specific exercises, demonstration of skills or discussion questions to go along with the didactic information given. Therefore, there is no opportunity to apply the information.

Evans accentuates gender differences because he believes they help spouses understand each other better. No references are made to social science literature or research. Surveys are referred to in his videotape lectures but no sources are given.

- ***Saving Your Marriage Before it Starts: A Marriage Curriculum for Engaged, About-to-be Engaged, and the Newly Married***

*Saving Your Marriage* is an excellent eight-session program presented by Les and Leslie Parrott, co-directors of The Center for Relationship Development. The program includes two videos, the book, *Saving your Marriage Before it Starts*, a workbook for women, a workbook for men, a leader's guide, and a marriage mentor manual. The mentoring book offers a few simple guidelines to experienced married couples helping newlyweds build a solid marriage bond. This curriculum can be used as eight weekly, two-hour sessions, a weekend retreat, or a one or two-day seminar event at a church or organization. It provides a suggested structure for each setting and specific instructions on how to best use the materials. Suggestions include using video clips from movies, expanding a session with role-play activities, and discussion questions.

Viewing the Parrotts on the video is the stimulus for each of the program's topic. The setting is an informal and comfortable one, and the Parrotts are delightful, warm, and entertaining in presenting their materials. Couples have an opportunity to interact with the materials and to hear interviews with the couples on the video as they process the materials.

The Parrotts have a solid reputation in the Christian community as writers of Christian books and family life educators, yet little reference to social science research or scripture is incorporated in their presentation. They have a balanced view of gender. This is an excellent program, especially for younger couples.

- ***Ten Great Dates to Energize Your Marriage***
- ***The Second Half of Marriage: Facing the Eight Challenges of the Empty-Nest Years***

Produced by Marriage Alive International, the founders and co-directors, David and Claudia Arp, were trained by David and Vera Mace, the pioneers of the marriage enrichment movement. They have adapted some of the Maces' materials in their *Marriage Alive* seminars. The first video curriculum was developed for couples of any age and the second is a specific curriculum for later life marriages. In each video series, the Arps present the materials to a workshop audience. They introduce and expand on a specific topic in the book that accompanies the workshop. They share personal stories to illustrate their points and invite couples to interact with each other at the end of each session using workbook exercises. The home viewing audience can pause the tape and take the time they need to go through the exercise before going on to the next session, allowing couples to go at their own pace. Each session is designed to engage couples in meaningful dialogue about their marriage in order to set goals and evaluate their progress.

The Arps' *Leader's Guide* gives thoughtful and thorough instruction on each topic presented. The workshop leader has clear guidance but also can be flexible according to the needs of a particular group. Although the Arps give no over-riding biblical principles to frame their materials, they bring in Scripture from time to time. They give personal testimony of their faith in Christ and freely indicate their Christian commitment. They include a session on spiritual aspects of the marital relationship, dealings with topics like "What makes a marriage Christian?" and "Ways to promote spiritual meaning and closeness in a marriage."

In terms of gender, the Arps promote a companionship marriage, adopting democratic ideals and the New Testament mandates of mutual submission and reciprocal servanthood. They use terms like, "together serve others" and ask the question "does your marriage reflect God's image?" They look at differences in personalities and teach couples how to balance these differences to strengthen the marriage. They do cite some research.

In conclusion, the Arps are a personable couple who have produced a well-organized professional produced video series. Direct interaction with couples and demonstration would have enhanced their program and brought more energy to the project.

- ***The Marriage Breakthrough***

*The Marriage Breakthrough* includes a leader's kit; five, thirty-minute interactive video seminars, along with a "Keeping Love Alive" audio program, the book *Divorce Busting*, and a 200 page leader's guide which includes a complete set of reproducible handouts. Michele Weiner-Davis, a marriage and family therapist, is author and presenter of the materials. The tenant of Wiener-Davis' solution focused approach is that successful marriages have nothing to do with luck or choosing the right person or being more in love, but about learning effective skills. The leader encourages participants to become solution-minded by looking for the positive ways they can improve their relationships.

The material is beautifully packaged and well written. Weiner-Davis' presentation to a live audience is energetic, entertaining and informative. Her enthusiasm about marriage education and enrichment as a "divorce busting" act is contagious. She is relaxed, open, and humorous in her talk on the sexual relationship. The nice balance between didactic and experiential exercises gives couples an opportunity to reflect privately on the material. The materials can be used in various formats, such as a weekend series, workshop, or small group setting.

Wiener-Davis references current research through her presentation. While her secular approach does not include a biblical or theological perspective, we believe her material represents the very best of what a marital enrichment program can be. She brings out the need for forgiveness and acceptance and builds on the bond of friendship and relational commitment—components in relationships that comport nicely with Christian values.

The materials are designed to use the program "right out of the box" with no additional training needed for educators, clergy, and counselors. The program is not only easy to use but also easy to teach. The material claims to be psychobabble free, goal oriented, and effective even if only one spouse attends. There are no demonstrations, but couples are able to spend time reflecting on the materials in private. There is information about how to advertise and market enrichment programs that we found helpful. We believe these materials could easily be used in a religious setting with the presence of a trained church leader who is capable of integrating a biblical perspective.

- ***The Marriage Connection: Wedding the Spiritual & the Practical***

This resource by Bridgett Brennans of The Cana Institute is a real gem. This facilitator's guide instructs leaders on how to assist young married couples in their marital journey. The outline provides a helpful structure in how to use the material in a workshop or retreat setting. The comfortable pace creates a safe and relaxed atmosphere in which couples can reflect upon and process topical ideas in mini-conversations. This material is suitable for use at the parish/church or community level. The material can easily be adapted for a series of sessions as well.

The poem, "Magnificate of Betrothal" by Ann Johnson along with the ending prayer of healing is an example of the religious sensitivity and focus of the program. Topics in this book range from covenant/contract, values, finances, conflict, lovemaking (which includes housework and childcare as well as mysteries of love and relationship), and the healing power of love. There is flexibility in using and adapting the material according to the leader's insights and creativity. The guide serves as a background text and contains attractive handouts that can be copied and used directly with couples.

This book is well documented, including a bibliography of current writing and research in the field, although the research findings are not applied within the program *per se*. Some of the exercises are adapted from LifePartnerQuest. Gender egalitarian marriage is emphasized. Marriage is viewed as a call and decision to share lives together as a blessing to the world and the church.

### **Marriage Enrichment Small Group Format**

These materials are put together for the purposes of small group marriage enrichment. The authors encourage couples to work on a weekly basis in the context of a small group setting where other group members can encourage and keep them accountable in their marriages.

- ***A Handbook for Married Couples***

- ***A Handbook for Engaged Couples***
- ***Marriage: God's Design for Intimacy***

These two handbooks published by Intervarsity Press and written by Alice and Robert Fryling are worthy of mention in this article. The strength of these handbooks is the quality and helpfulness of the questions and exercises given for an individual, couple or group reflection. A range of topics are covered, including motivation, money and possessions, spiritual growth, moods and emotions, sexual fulfillment, failure and forgiveness, and setting goals. The authors refer to relevant social science literature and biblical texts. The Frylings hold up a mutual submission, egalitarian model as the foundation for gender roles in marriage.

Another part of the InterVarsity *LifeGuide Bible Study* series is the beneficial booklet *Marriage: God's Design for Intimacy*, written by James and Martha Reapsome. Biblical passages serve as the focus for each chapter and provide provocative reflection and discussion. Leaders' notes at the end of the book are an excellent help. The booklet contains no reference to social science literature, relies strongly on biblical passages, and has a balanced view of gender.

- ***Authentic Marriages: How to Connect with Other Couples Through a Marriage Accountability Group***
- ***Authentic Marriages Workbook***

Written by Jeff and Lora Helton, these are designed for couples who want to keep each other accountable for marital health through a small group setting. This is an excellent source on how to form an accountability group and keep it meaningful. Part I includes how to get to know each other in a group setting, authenticity, fears and stages of the group. Part II provides helpful ideas about starting a group, keeping covenant, care and support, accountability, forgiveness, and communication. The "Before the Group" section prepares members for the scheduled meetings, while "During the Group" and "After the Group" sections give instruction about group process and activities for each couple to do on their own. The materials also include helpful sections on tasks and tools, check-in discussion questions, focus for the evening, group interaction time, reflections and practical application to marriage.

Aspects of the Heltons' program include community, genuineness, integrity, growth, and speaking the truth in love. The purpose of this program is to provide a structure for how to participate in an accountability group, offering starting points and practical ideas for spending fifteen weeks together as couples. The program includes in the material real-life examples, psychologically and theologically sound reflections, couple assessment tools, topics to be discussed, and assignments to apply the principles. —

The program is clearly designed for a Christian audience, with Scripture verses and prayer times included in the small group guidelines. Keeping track of personal and marriage prayer requests is a part of each session. In dealing with personality differences, the authors make the comment that men and women operate best when they both strive for a balance. They recognize that people don't always fit gender stereotypes and yet note the tendency to complement one's spouse as a common tendency. There are no social science research references although the authors do refer to other well-known Christian writers in the counseling field. This is an excellent help for lay couples who want a well-organized small group experience to keep their marriage strong.

- ***Bethany House Marriage Materials***

Several authors have contributed to this enrichment series designed for small Bible study groups. *What if I Married the Wrong Person: Help and Hope on the Question Nearly Every Couple Asks* by Matteson and Harris (1996), a sensitive, inspirational book, is suitable for an individual, couple or small group format. Each chapter includes exercises, journaling, assessment, contemplations, and prayer to help the reader put into practice the knowledge given.

Robert (Methodist pastor) and Debra Bruce have written *Reclaiming Intimacy in Your Marriage: A Plan for Facing Life's Ebb and Flow Together* (1996). This step-by-step eight-week program is designed to strengthen the emotional, practical and spiritual bonds that make a solid marriage, including daily exercises assisting the couple in dealing with topics like being spiritual soul-mates, recharging friendship, de-stressing life, taking time for romance and facing life's interruptions. Marital and family resources are used throughout this excellent book.

Steve Carr, a Calvary Chapel pastor, has written a compassionate book, *Married and How to Stay That Way! A Treasury of Radical Solutions Based Solely on God's Word* (1998). The end of each chapter provides a list of actions to be taken as well as group discussion questions. Carr uses concepts like covenant, companionship, reconciliation, and honoring. Although an eight part video series and accompanying worksheet is available, we did not receive copies of these materials to review.

These three books offer a "soft patriarchy," in which mutual submission to Christ is taught, and readers are offered correctives on what male leadership and female submission do not mean. In general, the biblical passages and principles are offered as the foundation for marital relationships. The authors do not cite research support for their work.

- ***Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate***
- ***Toward a Growing Marriage: Building the Love Relationship of Your Dreamss***
- ***Five Signs of a Loving Family***
- ***The World's Easiest Guide to Family Relationships***

The best-selling book, *Five Love Languages*, written by Gary Chapman, Ph.D. includes a comprehensive study guide in the back and a video or audio version. The materials are attractively packaged and can be used by the couple or in a small group. Chapman's book, *Toward a Growing Marriage* includes a helpful "growth assignment" section with a separate set of questions for married and unmarried couples. His two books on family relationships are worth mentioning: *Five Signs of a Loving Family* and *The World's Easiest Guide to Family Relationships* (with Randy Southern). These books include a variety of exercises to help couples, parents, and children evaluate themselves in relationships, with a special focus on anger, power, love languages, and showing affection. The accompanying handbook includes marriage dynamics. All these materials include couple exercises and self-rating scales. The daily "love talk" questions can easily be used as interesting table conversation to assist couples in knowing each other better.

While Chapman's original marriage book was characterized by a strong scriptural presence, his later books contain few references to Scripture. The love languages are not gender specific but reference is made to the importance of understanding the unique needs of the spouse and how gender differences present themselves in the love languages. Although resources are listed, no social science research is cited. The material is easily applied and helpful to those who want to understand and relate to each other more effectively. The practical ideas and exercises increase relationship functioning.

- ***Love in the Trenches: A Couples Guide to Overcoming the Power Struggle***
- ***I'd Rather Be Married: Finding Your Future Spouse***

Al Crowell, a social worker, offers a book and videotape for couples to use in the privacy of their home or in a church or community small group setting. Crowell explains a particular technique, then demonstrates with real couples using the skill in everyday situations at home. The video sessions include: listening and validating, using anger as a constructive asset, making do-able requests, making friends with your feelings, growing in self knowledge, and relationship as a spiritual path. Gender as a factor is not addressed. No social science references are given, nor is there reference to the Bible or theological principles.

*I'd Rather Be Married* is a workbook written by Crowell for singles who are looking for a suitable match

and want to choose the right partner. It prepares them to get ready for a relationship that works, to find available partners, to figure out if the person is right, and to learn about intimacy. Each chapter ends with a series of exercises to help persons discover more about themselves. The program addresses family of origin influences, dating feedback, ambivalence about relationships and a safety yardstick.

- ***Prevention and Relation Enhancement Program (PREP)***
- ***Christian PREP***

PREP is a program based on 15 years of research at the University of Denver. The program offers a variety of products and material for couples wanting to incorporate the PREP approach into their relationships. Instructor training is provided to mental health professionals, counselors, clergy members or lay leaders who want to give retreats on PREP. A book for mentoring couples by Savanna McCain is a comprehensive manual dealing with the leader's role, selecting, training and evaluating mentors, as well as offering step-by-step directions for using PREP.

The material is intended for small groups of couples, with a format covering a four to ten week time frame. There are weekly homework assignments with an accompanying study guide. The leader facilitates the group's shared activities and guides the couple as they practice the PREP skills.

The three-tape video series has edited stops so a couple can work along with the materials in the book, *Fighting for your Marriage* co-authored by Howard Markman, Scott Stanley & Susan Blumberg. Also available are four videos that show couples going through the step-by-step process of learning the critical communication and conflict resolution skills. An audiotape of this series is available as well. All these materials are of highest quality.

Readers will be most interested in *Christian PREP*, a version of PREP written by Scott Stanley, Daniel Trathen, Savanna McCain and Milt Bryan in the book, *A Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage* (1998). The premise of *Christian PREP* is that "all truth is God's truth." Thus the authors draw wisdom from both the Bible and social science research. Scott Stanley and Milt Bryan designed this program for newly engaged to long-time married Christian couples wanting to learn communication and conflict resolution skills in order to prevent problems. *Christian PREP* also includes a video demonstrating the key relational skills to be practiced. Real couples provide clear examples of why communication breaks down or escalates and how speaker-listener skills facilitate understanding and resolution.

*Christian PREP* is based on the framework of "no longer two but one" and "the three-fold cord" as images of unity through faith in God. Commitment, forgiveness, and spiritual themes are promoted and Scripture verses are offered as support for communication and conflict resolution skills, as couples seek to break old patterns that destroy oneness. Part II focuses on spiritual beliefs and expectations, commitment, forgiveness, friendship, sexual, and spiritual intimacy, each of which include helpful reflection questions for a couple. A major strength of the program is that it includes a strong emphasis on both understanding marital dynamics and on training and relational skills building. *Christian PREP* recognizes personality and gender differences that impact the marriage relationship. Jesus is used as a model to define marriage—a relationship in which both partners seek to serve the other based on a mutual commitment to a shared future.

The PREP program brings the strongest research base for marital communication and conflict. It is one of the few marriage enrichment programs that has demonstrated its effectiveness. Since 1980, 135 couples from the Denver community have been followed to determine the short and long term effect of PREP when compared with a control group (Stanley, Blumberg & Markman, 1999, p. 297-301). Pre-post analyses indicate that PREP couples showed significant improvement in conflict management skills compared to the control couples where no such gains occurred. Marital satisfaction was also maintained with the PREP couples, whereas the control couples showed significant decline in satisfaction over time. In addition, PREP couples showed significantly lower levels of aggression than the control group after 7-12 years.

Participants in this program report significant gains in communication (skills usage, positive affect,

problem-solving skill, and support/validation) as well as conflict management skills from pre-to post-test. There was a lower divorce rate for participants in the program (1.6%) as compared to controls (12.5%). PREP couples showed less withdrawal, less denial, less dominance, less negative affect, less overall negative communication, and fewer instances of physical violence than the control couples (Stanley, Blumberg & Markman, 1999, p. 298-299).

- ***Starting Your Marriage Right: What You Need to Know and Do in the Early Years to Make it Last a Lifetime***

Dennis Rainey, executive director of Homebuilders Couple Series introduces this program in an 8-minute informational video. The book builds on small group principles including individual reflection, couple discussion questions, and a couple's action item. An entire series of spiral bound study guides cover a variety of marital topics such as: *Building Your Marriage, Improving Your Communication, Growing Together in Christ, Mastering Money, Building Teamwork, Overcoming Stress, and Resolving Conflict*.

The kit includes a helpful *Leader's Guide* with solid instruction on starting and leading a couples group. A step-by-step instruction book for the leader and participants, *Building Teamwork in Your Marriage* by Robert Lewis, is especially useful in a couples' group setting. It includes non-threatening interaction ideas along with photocopy privileges of the materials. Each week there is a warm-up time, a focus on a particular topic, sharing time, special exercises, and conclusion. The small group topics can be an avenue of evangelizing neighbors and non-churched people. Some of the study guides are in Spanish.

In this series the Bible is regarded as a blueprint and final authority for building a godly marriage and dealing with practical issues of living. Scripture passages are used and applied in practical ways to the marriage relationship. The major theme is to rely on the Holy Spirit and God's Word to do what God requires in making marriage strong.

The homebuilder gender principle is to affirm true equality in marriage through understanding, appreciating and honoring each other's differences. Believing that the woman's greatest need is to be loved rightly and the man's is to be respected, they promote a servant-leader role for men and a submissive role for woman as a spiritual response allowing the husband to fulfill his spiritual role. This soft patriarchy stance is compassionate, but puts a great deal of emphasis on male/female stereotypical roles rather than roles developed out of mutual consent. Although no social science references are given in the text, some are given at the end of each chapter.

- ***The Essential Humility of Marriage***

This useful book by Terry Hargrave, Professor of Marriage and Family at Amarillo College, advocates keeping the marriage alive through nurturing the "Us" (relationship). Love and trust are established through three characteristics—stability, security, and sincerity. He espouses a committed, reliable, responsible partnership that involves sacrifice, teachability, and responsiveness to one's spouse and the relationship.

While Hargrave's materials are written primarily for therapists, it can be beneficial for family life ministers and adapted for marriage retreats/conferences. The book can also serve as a resource guide for a couple or a small group. Topics include realities of marriage, marital stability, family of origin issues, conflict patterns, power issues in work/finances, parenting, sexual infidelity and building trust.

Key marital literature and research findings are referenced throughout the book. He promotes companionship and egalitarian marriage over traditional models, asserting that both husbands and wives must learn to accommodate for the good of the other and the relationship. Although Hargrave makes no biblical references, he takes a moral position based on sound relationship principles consistent with Scripture. Unique aspects of the book include 16 couple exercises, an assessment scale, and a focus on the counselor's role.

## **Marriage Enrichment/Study Guide In-Home Formats**

These in-home formats are written for married couples who are putting energy into improving their relationship in the privacy of their home. Couples read the book, chapter by chapter, engage in reflection questions at the end of the chapter and work on suggested exercises promoted in the book.

- ***As for Me and My House: Crafting Your Marriage to Last (expanded edition with study guide)***

The expanded edition of *As for Me and My House* by Walter Wangerin, Jr., is a wonderful addition to this popular book on marriage. The study guide provides the couple with an opportunity to work through the materials at home or in a small group setting. The thirteen-session format makes it easy to use as an adult Sunday school class elective. There are specific discussion items for group reflection and a “between couples” sharing opportunity. Each chapter ends with a closing prayer.

This devotional book unfolds the personal story of Wangerin’s marriage and his conviction that marriage is a gift. He deals with intriguing topics like: “What is Marriage Meant to Be?,” “The Divine Ideal,” “What is Forgiveness?,” “The Divine Absurdity,” “Faithfulness unto Death,” “Truthfulness and Dependability,” “Sharing the Work of Survival,” “Making Love,” and “Healing.” This book helps couples examine, understand their relationship and inspires them to a fresh honesty and future hope.

No social science research is referenced. Given its devotional nature, Scripture is central. As for gender, “mutualization” is a word used to describe the way spouses need to harmonize as husband and wife. The focus is on individual giftedness, even though instrumental and emotional gender differences are noted. The challenge is for the couple to achieve mutuality. Spouses learn to live together in harmony by knowing and nourishing the “oneness” of their marriage as they put the priority on the relationship.

- ***It Takes Two: The Joy of Intimate Marriage***

This sensible guide written by Andrew D. and Judith L. Lester discusses how to create an intimate marriage from the outset and develop levels of intimacy not yet experienced. Preventive in nature, the focal point is how to protect and enrich the marital commitment. Andrew (pastoral counselor) and Judith (licensed therapist) have been married to each other for nearly 40 years and have firsthand knowledge to share from their own journey as well as through the stories of those they have counseled over the years.

Aware of the research and writing in the field of marriage and family, the Lesters focus on particular themes on the marital journey. Acknowledging that much of the literature on marriage is Euro-American, mainline Protestant middle-class, the authors invite the reader to interpret information given in light of their own ethnic background, social history and religious traditions. Topics covered are: sharing power and responsibility; the joy of sexual intimacy; the spiritual journey of forgiveness and justice; and making changes through covenants. Suggested resources are given at the end of each chapter for those who desire to pursue the topic further. This is a delightful find in the enrichment materials reviewed.

The Lesters write from the Judeo-Christian tradition, bringing in theological concepts on marriage gleaned from the Bible. The authors stress gender equality before God, assuming that male and female are created in God’s image and equally loved and cherished by God. The ideal marriage is defined as a partnership characterized by mutuality, sharing responsibility in making decisions and meeting the needs of both self and partner. Marriage is viewed as a unique journey and the couple is invited to develop their personal couple story. Guided through participation exercises at the end of each chapter, a couple can practice and reflect in the privacy of their home or in a small group format. The Lesters guide is the most culturally sensitive of all the material we reviewed.

- ***The Five Love Needs of Men and Women***

*The Five Love Needs of Men and Women* is the product of Gary and Barbara Rosberg, co-founders of America’s Family Coaches. These authors teach couples practical ways to meet each other’s needs through discussion questions and goal setting tips at the end of each chapter. No reference is made to

social science research. Scripture verses are given throughout the book. Although the Rosbergs discuss relational needs along gender-specific lines, there is an awareness of common needs among husbands and wives as well.

- ***The 5 Steps to Romantic Love Workbook***
- ***Lovebusters***
- ***His Needs, Her Needs***
- ***Fall in Love, Stay in Love***

These books are written by clinical psychologist and licensed marital and family therapist, Willard F. Harley, Jr. Harley presents a practical workbook that contains instruction, contracts, questionnaires, inventories, worksheets and forms to be used by a couple or group leader for strategizing to defeat old patterns and develop new approaches to marital problems. The five-step sequence includes: making a commitment to build romantic love, identifying love busters, overcoming love busters (anger, disrespectful judgments, annoying behavior, selfish demands and dishonesty), identifying emotional needs, and learning to meet emotional needs.

Harley's most recent book, *Fall in Love, Stay in Love* offers insights and techniques to build and sustain love in marriage. Each chapter ends with "Key Principles" and a "Thinking it Through" section. The appendix gives a summary of the basic concepts, questionnaires, and agreement forms.

No social science references or biblical references are cited. Gender differences are not emphasized since both men and women are challenged to care for each other and the marriage by developing strategies for quality time, family commitment, domestic and financial support, recreational companionship, fair negotiation and joint agreement tactics. We found these books to be sensitive and practical in nature.

## Summary

We have found much variation in the marriage enrichment programs we reviewed. Different delivery styles may be needed to best reach alternative types of marriage situations. An advantage of the weekend "marathon" retreat is the concentrated time that allows for subsequent sessions to build upon previous ones, resulting in an intensity of focus.

The marathon retreat may result in a "mountain top" experience, however, and have less long-term benefit than a series of sessions in which couples have time to practice and focus on a weekly basis. Arcus, Schvaneveldt & Moss' (1993) conclusion that the benefits of "marriage enrichment programs do appear to diminish over time" would lend support for small group interaction over a longer time frame. It is noteworthy that Guerny and Maxson (1990) advocate "booster programs" following the marathon weekend, when skill building can continue to take place as a solution to this dilemma.

To date, there is more impressionistic than empirical research assessing the strengths, limitations and efficacy of enrichment programs (with the exception of PREP). There is some evidence that programs seem to be more effective "when they are experiential and involve behavioral rehearsal process," according to Arcus, Schvaneveldt & Moss 1993 (1993, p. 50). Undoubtedly some couples do benefit from learning content about marriage through lecture type presentations. Others would be reluctant to attend a program that requires participation. Skill building makes content applicable to real life situations, however. The broader literature on effective education and learning methods indicate that marriage enrichment programs will be most effective when participants are given a chance to *process* and *practice* the content (Berger & Hannah, 1999, Arcus, Schvaneveldt & Moss, 1993).

The common denominator of all these programs is the view that strength-based curriculum and skill development will increase a couple's satisfaction with their marriage relationship and working on the major areas of stress and conflict in marriage will alleviate a couples' dissatisfaction. Therefore, learning good communication and conflict resolution is a primary focus. While there is variation in the specific content in the program curriculum, typical problems addressed are children, sex, money,

in-laws, religion, roles, and personality differences.

In their interview of 120 couples who had been married an average of nine years, Barbara Fiese, Ph.D. and Thomas Tomcho (2001) discovered that those who find meaning in shared religious holiday rituals were more satisfied with marriage. Intimacy and connection through religious practices along with the husband's emotional investment in these events was an important indicator of marital satisfaction. We would urge church leaders to consider the importance of this finding when giving marriage enrichment retreats. Incorporating religious meaning through rituals and ceremonies can be a very significant part of a marriage enrichment program. Having a corporate time of worship, prayer, a communion service, and a renewal of vows during marriage retreats can deepen the spiritual connection and marital satisfaction.

In general, there seems to be an inverse relationship between building a program on biblical texts and building a program on social science literature and research. In most instances, the Bible seems to be used as a *proof text*, rather than as an integrated theological model for marriage. If God is the author of all knowledge, then it seems to us that what is most needed is the developmental of marital enrichment programs that are based on an integration of the best empirical studies on marriage, social science literature, outcome research on program effectiveness and a comprehensive use of biblical truth as a foundation for marriage.

## References

- Arcus, M. (1995). Advances in family life education: past, present, and future. *Family Relations*. 44:4, 336-344.
- Arcus, M., Schvaneveldt, J. & Moss, J. (1993). *Handbook of family life education: The practice of family life education*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Barna, G. (2001). *Born again adults less likely to co-habit, just as likely to divorce*. Barna Research Online. ([www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org))
- Brice, R. & Brice, D. (1996). *Reclaiming intimacy in your marriage: A plan for facing life's ebb and flow together*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers.
- Cornes, A. (1993). *Divorce & remarriage: Biblical principles & pastoral practice*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing.
- Dyer, P & Dyer, G. (1986). Leadership training for marriage and family enrichment. *Journal of Psychotherapy and the Family*, 2, 97-110.
- Elin, R. (1999). Marriage Encounter: A positive preventive enrichment program. In R. Berger & M. Hannah (Eds.), *Preventive approaches in couples therapy*.
- Fiese, B. & Tomcho, T. (2001). Finding meaning in religious practices: The relation between religious holiday rituals and marital satisfaction. *Journal of Family Psychology*, Dec., 15:4, 597-607.
- Giblin, P. Sprenkle, D. & Sheehan, R. (1985). Enrichment outcome research: A meta-analysis study. In W. Denton (Ed.), *Marriage and family enrichment* (pp. 79-96). New York: Haworth.
- Guerney, B. & Maxson, P. (1990). Marital and family enrichment research: A decade review and look ahead. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52, 1127-1135.
- Hof, L. & Miller, W. (1980). Marriage enrichment. *Marriage & Family Review*, 3, 1-27.
- Mace, D. (1982). *Close companions: The marriage enrichment handbook*. New York: Continuum.
- Stahmann, R. & Salts, C. (1993). Educating for marriage and intimate relationships, In M. Arcus, J. Schvaneveldt & J. Moss (Eds.), *Handbook of family life education: The practice of family life education* (pp.33-61). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Stanley, S., Blumbert, S. & Markman, H. (1999). Helping couples fight for their marriages: The PREP approach. In R. Berger & M. Hannah, (Eds.), *Preventive approaches in couples therapy*.

Stanley, S, H., Markman, H, Peters, M & Leber B. (1995). Strengthening Marriages and preventing divorce: New directions in prevention research. *Family Relations*. 44:4, 392-401.



Judith Balswick is Professor of Family Therapy and Director of the Marital and Family Therapy Program in the School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary, 180 Oakland, Pasadena, CA 91101. E-mail: [jbalswic@fuller.edu](mailto:jbalswic@fuller.edu)



Jack Balswick is Professor of Sociology and Family Development at the Fuller Theological Seminary. E-mail: [job@fuller.edu](mailto:job@fuller.edu)