

Community Marriage Impact Begins with a Team of Two

It was coined “an historic gathering” as fifteen pastors and their wives united for the expressed purpose of impacting their culture by building up marriages. The end result was that over 100 people joined together for a Marriage Mentoring conference weekend in rural New England. A number of these couples caught the vision of how they could positively impact other marriages using the simple yet profound concepts of authentic relationships.

If churches across the United States are going to unite to impact our culture in marriage, what needs to be done? There are three key elements: 1) Pastor and wife “Teams of Two” unite, 2) Big dreams converge and 3) Married couples connect. There must be a sense that God is doing something greater than any of the churches by themselves. This article was written with the hope of inspiring pastoral couples from different churches to unite in communities across America to rescue and build up marriages using biblical truths and positive relational skills. In a number of cases it may take committed lay couples to come along side their pastors to influence and support them in this direction.

Pastor and Wife “Teams of Two” Unite

For a number of years in our community there has been a small group of evangelical pastors who have met together on Tuesdays to share ministry ideas and to pray for each other and their ministries. God had convinced my wife and me that it was time that we took the initiative to lead a team of leadership couples to influence marriages. It was to this group that I proposed joining together to focus on building up the marriages in our churches and then to impact marriages in our community. As a prerequisite to being a part of the team we required that if a pastor was to be involved he must serve jointly with his wife as a “team of two”. Every pastor agreed that this was God’s timing and that they would like to be a part of the undertaking. As we mentioned the idea to pastors’ wives they wholeheartedly agreed and jumped at the opportunity to work with their husbands in this ministry project. We agreed that our first marriage building project would be to host a Marriage Mentoring Seminar. (Refer to photograph #1 “15 Rutland, Vermont area pastors and wives with Garcia’s and Bragg’s”.)



To start up a community initiative on marriage it makes sense to have great examples to lead the way. To ask a pastor and wife to be part of a leadership team is tough because pastors are already so busy in many areas of ministry. To address this concern, we told the pastors that we were not looking for something more for them to do, but that they were to consider which couples in their churches would benefit by this type of ministry. The goal would be for the pastoral couples to bring other couples with

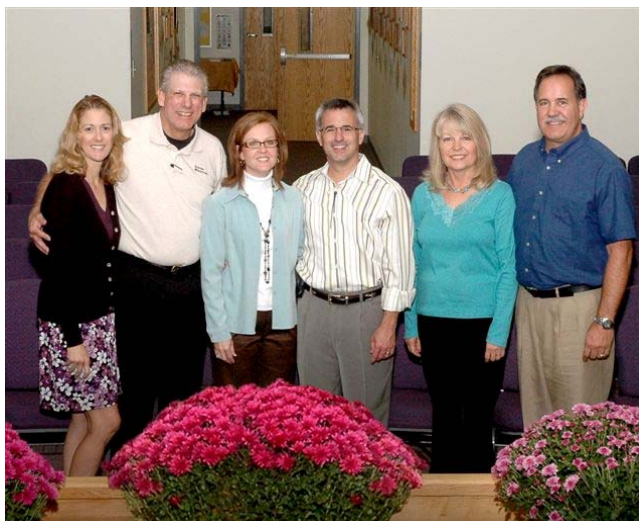
them to catch a vision of marriage mentoring. After the conference, the ministry would be led by a team of non-pastoral couples who felt called by God to champion this cause.

It can also be very risky for a pastor to do a marriage ministry with his wife because their marriage and skills as a couple will be in the spotlight. If they are honest, the couple may feel the need to refocus on portions of their own marriage. This may be one of the reasons why lay leaders find a push back when they approach pastors about starting marriage ministries in churches. Often pastors and wives feel very isolated because they cannot share their joys or struggles. To overcome this, my wife and I opened our home to the pastors and wives for several months prior to the seminar. In the midst of planning out the seminar logistics, our home became a safe place where the pastoral couples could laugh, talk and pray with each other. Note, one pastor was a single man who was warmly welcomed into the pastoral group.

To promote the concept of pastors and wives serving together in ministry, a number of options were created. A photograph of each pastoral couple was taken and placed on a website which promoted the area-wide seminar. This allowed inquiries to see which churches were involved in the event and contact them with questions. Ownership in the seminar project was gained by each pastoral couple volunteering together in an area of interest: worship team, greeting, refreshments, prayer team, etc. During the mentoring conference the pastors and wives teamed up with other leadership couples to practice being the mentor or the mentee couple. One pastor stated about his experience, "The 'us-ness' factor kicked in for my wife and me." There was great energy there and we can see ourselves doing this together to touch other couples. We would also like to get connected to AMFM.'

Big Dreams Converge

The big dream that Dawn and I had was to unite pastors and their wives to serve in ministry together as "Teams of Two" to impact their culture in the area of marriage. To attract the right people at the right time to accomplish a great work can be a challenge for us, but not for God. The Bible says, "Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?" (Amos 3:3, NIV) Unknown to us, God was about to pull together three couples from around the country to impact our community. (Refer to photograph #2 left to right "Penny and Clint Bragg, Jennifer and Eric Garcia, Dawn and Dave Lind")



Having been involved with AMFM as part of the leadership team and by attending the conferences Dawn and I have had the privilege of meeting and serving with godly men and women who are highly committed marriage and family. Since the pastors agreed that the great need in marriages was for marriage mentoring, we contacted Eric and Jennifer Garcia. They are the co-founders of AMFM (www.amfmonline.com) and also specialize in the area of Marriage Mentoring. When the Garcia's heard of the big vision that our 15 pastors had of reaching our community through marriage emphasis starting with marriage mentoring, Eric and Jennifer were excited to come. They assured us that their willingness

to come to Vermont had nothing to do with the fact that this was the peak foliage weekend (early October) of the year. They would present marriage mentoring through building authentic relationships between couples using conversations around basic relationship skills and Christian experience.

God's plan included adding a third couple to the weekend from California, Clint and Penny Bragg. Their miraculous story in brief is they were married, divorced, reconciled after 11 years and then remarried. Their big dream was to be marriage missionaries who promote the reconciling of relationships. Dawn and I had met them in Arizona at the 2006 AMFM conference where they attended and participated in a workshop of ours about clarifying the Big Dream that God has given them as a couple. Months later, my wife happened to hear a national radio interview with Eric and Jennifer Garcia, where they mentioned that the Bragg's were traveling on a 40 day trip across America wherever God led them to speak. I called Clint and Penny to see how the trip was going and invited them to consider coming to Vermont. They said they had only one weekend available – the same weekend that the Garcia's were leading the marriage mentoring conference in Rutland. The Bragg's came and spoke to a number of couples who committed to reconcile and then be connected through the mentoring program. The Bragg's 40 day story is recorded on www.InverseMinistries.org. An interesting note is that Clint and Penny started their 40 day journey across America with Eric and Jennifer Garcia sending them off from Scottsdale Bible Church in Scottsdale Arizona. Only God could have orchestrated that their last meeting would be with the Garcia's completely across the country in a little town in Vermont!

Married Couples Connect

During the marriage mentoring conference weekend over a hundred people showed up. They came from the 15 different churches - Baptist, Congregational, Methodist, Assembly of God, and Non Denominational Churches. These couples came because their pastor and wife believed in them enough to invite them. (Refer to photograph #3 "2006 Marriage Mentoring Conference attendees in Rutland, Vermont".)



The atmosphere of openness and vulnerability was set on the opening night when two pastoral couples shared about a tough time in their marriages. One pastor and wife talked about their marriage prior to knowing Christ and the other couple shared about life in the pastorate – both emphasized how mentoring would have been beneficial if it was available. Eric and Jennifer's teaching method was formed around couples practicing the mentoring skills with other couples. This modeling technique was safe and inviting. There was laughter and tears as husband and wife teams modeled coupleness. As a side benefit the people enjoyed getting to meet other Christian couples from other churches in a noncompetitive environment. One husband endorsed his Marriage Mentoring Conference experience by saying, "This was the best weekend of our marriage because my wife and I talked and learned about each other on a completely new level. Even if nothing else happens with what we did, it was worth it all."

Since the conference, a mentoring core group has formed. These are lay couples who are very committed to the couple to couple mentoring process. Future steps include a tasting supper where mentoring couples can learn about future training events. Some of the couple connections at the conference were so strong, that the mentor – mentee relationship have already started.

It is time for pastors to take an honest look at their relationship to their mate. During the Marriage Mentoring Conference, Eric Garcia made a powerful comment, "I came to the place in my life that it was no longer going to be about Eric, but about Eric and Jennifer!" What are you doing in ministry together that is part of an "us-ness"? Does your church have a united role connected to other churches where you are purposefully changing your culture? It is time that pastors and wives in "Teams of Two" unite, that we allow God to converge the Big Dreams of our people and that married couples connect. If we are committed to this process we believe that God will use us to change our culture toward biblical marriages for Christ.

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