

# ***10 Things You Should Know About Marriage & Family Agreements***

## **1. What is a Marriage & Family Agreement (MFA)?**

Clergy across all denominational lines come together and sign a pact called the Marriage and Family Agreement that requires all involved clergy to stand together on issues such as pre-marital education and counseling, programs like Marriage Encounter that strengthen existing marriages and the recruitment of mature married couples to help mentor newly-married couples.

## **2. Why do we need a Marriage & Family Agreement in my community?**

Wyoming has the 5th highest divorce rate in the United States. It is 25% higher than the national average and 2.4 times that of Massachusetts. In 2004, about five divorces occurred for every nine marriages in Wyoming, according to provisional data from the state's Vital Statistics Division.

An independent study of Community Marriage Coalitions adopted through 2000 reports that 50,000 divorces were averted by 2001. Divorce rates fell by an average of 17.5% over seven years, double the decline of similar cities. And the cohabitation rate fell by 33% more in 114 CMC cities than in similar cities in each state from 1990-2000.

Communities adopting similar policies have reduced divorce rates by an average of 17 percent, with some experiencing reductions of more than 50 percent.

## **3. How does the MFA cut the divorce rate?**

Clergy agree across denominational lines to adopt reforms which have a proven potential to prepare, enrich or restore a marriage. Each MFA is different as it is drafted by the MFA members in that community.

Some MFAs are requiring a minimum of four months marriage preparation” that includes taking a premarital inventory and being trained in skills to resolve conflict. In other words clergy are pledging across denominational lines that there will be no more “quickie weddings”. A tenth of couples who take an inventory, those in weak relationships, break an engagement. Studies show those couples have the same scores as those who marry and later divorce. Put simply, they’re avoiding a bad marriage before it begins.

Another often adopted reform is for engaged couples to meet with a “mature married couple,” trained to discuss the issues brought up by the inventory. These “Mentor Couples” are also trained to teach communication skills and help prepare a budget. In Wyoming, Cheyenne clergy are pledging to “create a support system of couples whose marriages” were once in crisis to mentor those in troubled marriages. For example, a couple who survived adultery has credibility to say to a similar couple in current crisis, “We made it. You can too.”

#### **4. How many communities have signed a Marriage & Family Agreement?**

Laramie County and Washakie Counties have fully functioning Marriage & Family Agreements. MFA's are in the works in Natrona, Sweetwater, Albany and Park Counties and others are soon to follow.

#### **5. Are all Marriage & Family Agreements the same?**

No, each community drafts its own MFA according to its needs. There is also no standardized expectation in how an individual congregation follows the MFA; each congregation is free to accomplish those minimum goals in its own way

#### **6. What is the process of getting a MFA started in a community?**

- 1) FIWY (Stephanie or Kathleen) will meet with 2 or 3 pastors in the community to determine their level of understanding concerning Wyoming's marriage problems, provide first level marriage resources and determine their level of interest in working towards a MFA in their community.
- 2) Host the first MFA meeting with 3 to 5 pastors to explain the MFA and who is on board around the state. At this meeting, a committee will be initiated and committee books distributed. A next meeting will be scheduled, selecting 1 or 2 new pastors each meeting over the next 3 to 6 meetings.
- 3) After 3 to 6 "building" meetings, the committee is ready to host a Marriage Forum Event where they receive feedback from the larger community on MFA and identify new committee members.
- 4) A Committee Chair can now be nominated by the committee and any missing factions of the community identified. A sub-committee of no more than 5 is formed to draft the MFA.
- 5) When the MFA has been finalized by the committee, it will be ready to be reviewed by the larger community including ministerial associations.
- 6) Signing Event is planned and executed by the MFA Committee
- 7) Plan "Pastor/Counselor/Mentor Couple Training" Event
- 8) Continue with an ongoing MFA Committee meeting regularly

#### **7. Why is marriage a better alternative than just living together or not committing to a marriage relationship?**

Studies show that married people:

- Earn and save more money
- Kids of married parents do better in school
- Married people enjoy better health
- Married people make better parents
- Kids of married parents do better economically
- Kids of married parents are more likely to have long-lasting marriages
- Married people live longer
- Married people have lower rates of substance abuse
- Married people are happier
- Married people spend half as much time in hospitals
- Married people live more stable, secure lives.
- Married people live more active lifestyles.
- Married women experience lower rates of domestic violence.
- Married people have better mental health.
- Boys raised by married parents are less likely to commit crimes.

## **8. What kinds of churches support the Wyoming Healthy Marriage Initiative?**

The diversity of churches that support MFAs in Wyoming is a large part of its success. In fact, we have often found that supporting Wyoming marriages is one thing they can all come together on across denominational and theological lines.

## **9. What kind of materials are used in counseling with couples before marriage?**

Marriage preparation should include a pre-marriage inventory and education in marital skills. "There are two or three excellent ones that have a long track record of helping couples see where their challenges might be and helps them to see whether they are truly compatible before they ever do get married," says Rev Kurt Borgaard of First Christian Church in Cheyenne. "That can help prevent bad marriages before they begin," he said, noting that about 1 out of every 10 couples who take the inventories do not proceed with the marriage.

## **10. Who are these "mentoring couples" I have heard about?**

MFAs encourage religious leaders to identify couples with strong marriages who can mentor young couples planning to marry.

We know that every congregation in town has couples that have strong, healthy marriages. They've been there, they've gone through the difficulties, but they've come out on top. That's partly because of the relationship skills they have.

Nationally-syndicated religion columnist and co-chair of Marriage Savers Mike McManus stresses the importance of involving mature married couples to help mentor newly-married couples. "In every congregation of every church or synagogue or mosque, there are couples in good marriages who could help other couples in struggling marriages," McManus said. Of the couples who have gone through all the recommended pre-marital counseling and mentoring, McManus said he knows of only three divorces since 1992.

How did they do it?

They recruited and trained mentors to help other couples achieve six great goals:

- Avoid a bad marriage before it begins by requiring a premarital inventory
- Give "marriage insurance" to the engaged, losing less than 5% to divorce with couples in solid marriages giving the inventory and talking through its issues.
- Strengthen existing marriages in every congregation by organizing an annual retreat
- Save 80%-90% of marriages headed toward divorce by training couples whose marriages once nearly failed to mentor those now in crisis.
- Reconcile more than half of the separated with a course, "Reconciling God's Way."
- Enable 80% of stepfamilies to be successful by creating Stepfamily Support Groups

The goal is to help build a 'safety net' under every marriage, starting with preparation.