

Missouri Ministry 'Battles' for the Family

Bishop Clifford and Pamela Frazier hope to strengthen families through their Battle for the Family conferences

A Missouri church is waging war on troubling statistics that show declining marriage rates among African-Americans and increasing out-of-wedlock births.

"We have more households in the [African-American] community headed by single moms than two-parent families," said Pamela Frazier, co-pastor of the predominantly black City of Life Christian Church in St. Louis with her husband, Bishop Clifford L. Frazier.

According to U.S. Census reports, 42 percent of African-Americans are married, compared with 61 percent of whites and 59 percent of Hispanics. Roughly 68 percent of African-American births are to single mothers, compared with 10 percent of white births and 7 percent of Hispanic births. And single parents head 62 percent of African-American households, while 27 percent of white households and 35 percent of Hispanic homes are led by singles.

The Fraziers hope to curb those trends and strengthen existing families through their Battle for the Family conferences and seminars, which offer practical ministry addressing various aspects of family life. "We talk about issues that singles and single parents can relate to, divorced and separated individuals and families," Clifford Frazier said of the annual family conference. "We cover finances and how to raise kids, especially for single parents."

Through its Let's Get Married outreach, the 1,100-member

church has motivated 25 cohabiting couples to wed since 2004. "A lot of them are shacking up because that's what they grew up with," Frazier said. After the couples participate in a nine-week course, the church sponsors a mass wedding and reception for all the graduates.

According to the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study commissioned by Princeton and Columbia universities, churches have a significant impact on African-American marriages and families. Churchgoing African-American women are 73 percent more likely to be married at the birth of their child, the study found, and unmarried mothers who attend church are 148 times more likely to marry after the birth of their child than nonattenders.

"Religion functions for African Americans much like it does for other Americans when it comes to things like getting married and having a good quality relationship," said W. Bradford Wilcox, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Virginia who led the study's research on religion and marriage.

"But there are other factors in the environment for African-Americans that tend to exert a negative influence [such as poverty and racism]," he said, "and those things help account for the distinctive marriage trends we see in the black community."

Wilcox said the majority of respondents wanted their churches to offer more programs on relationship issues.

For the Fraziers, the emphasis on family ministry was unintended. "We started a church in Dallas and immediately

were putting out fires among couples and families,” said Clifford Frazier, who has ministered in 48 nations with his wife, whom he and the church affectionately call “Mama.”

“Mama told me that we need to be proactive instead of reactive. That’s when our ministry started addressing the family.”

In 1997 the couple moved from the Dallas church, called Heartline Ministries, to pastor City of Life ().

Every February, the Fraziers devote a week to ministering on family issues, and for years in Dallas they hosted a live call-in radio show called Straight From the Heart that grew from 15 minutes to 30 minutes to an hour. The couple said hundreds of lives have been changed.

Ann Perry was so tired of her husband’s drug addiction, she once held a gun to his head, thinking she’d shoot him and herself. But instead of taking both their lives, she dropped the gun and later stumbled onto Straight From the Heart. “Mama would always say, ‘If it’s bothering you, it’s bothering God,’” Perry recalled.

Perry told her husband to listen to the show, and he eventually visited the Fraziers’ church. There, he accepted Christ and found complete deliverance. Today the Perrys lead a Celebrate Recovery ministry through Heartline Ministries in Dallas.

Johnny Gulley was a drug dealer and had been divorced for 12 years when his ex-wife, Linda, invited him to a Battle for the Family conference. After attending a series of classes for

men, Gulley accepted Christ, abandoned his criminal lifestyle and eventually reconciled with his wife.

Gulley kept his commitment to Christ even after he was arrested on old charges of auto theft and sentenced to life in prison, where he started leading Bible studies and baptizing people. In time, Gulley's sentence miraculously was commuted to time served and he was released. Today he is the president of the deacon board.

"There is nothing too hard for God to do on family issues and bedroom issues," Clifford Frazier said. "We've seen God do the impossible."

Leilani Haywood in St. Louis