

Marriage Insurance

A success rate of 97 percent in keeping marriages intact? That's phenomenal.

For a long time after World War II it used to be said, "The family that prays together, stays together." The implication was clear: Families that seek to follow the Lord in all of their doings are more likely to avoid divorce than those that don't. What that motto conceals is that "praying together" isn't at all the same thing as merely attending a certain church.

When respected evangelical pollster George Barna released his own figures for Christian marriage breakdown in the United States in 1999, he shocked evangelicals and charismatics. He discovered that evangelical Christian Americans are more likely to get divorced than both liberal and mainline Protestant groupings and the entirely unchurched.

Southern Baptists topped the list as a big group with a 29 percent divorce likelihood. They were followed by mainline Protestants such as Episcopalians and Methodists (25 percent), with Roman Catholics and Lutherans being the same (21 percent). The entirely unchurched came in at equal last, with 21 percent.

How come? All kinds of explanations have been offered. But I think Michael McManus revealed the most striking explanation in his path-breaking book *Marriage Savers* (Zondervan, 1995).

While researching the whole topic of the relation of Christian churches to marriage and divorce in America, Barna discovered that, overwhelmingly, Christian churches—where three-quarters

of all marriages in America occur—simply fail to prepare couples for marriage.

Only the Roman Catholics require months of marriage preparation for engaged couples. They also had developed a “premarital inventory” test for engaged or seriously dating couples called FOCCUS (Facilitating Open Couple Communication and Study) that helps identify before marriage potential problem areas. FOCCUS can actually predict with 80 percent accuracy which couples are likely to divorce.

Before going on, I need to reveal, for purposes of journalistic integrity, that I am biased in favor of Michael and Harriet McManus and Marriages Savers, a nonprofit entity. I am on their board (though without any financial or operational connections) and of course I think that what they have been doing is fantastic.

The McManuses oversaw a marriage preparation program from 1992-2000 in their church, Fourth Presbyterian in Bethesda, Maryland, a 2,000-strong congregation in the Washington, D.C., suburbs. One innovation they employed was the training and deployment of Mentoring Couples—mature married couples in the church willing to meet for several weeks with couples in the program seriously considering marriage.

After some nine years, the results were startling. Investigation revealed that of the 302 couples who signed up for the course, 25 either dropped out or could not be tracked down later, but 34 couples decided not to marry each other, largely on the basis of the premarital inventory, thus sparing themselves the pain of probable divorce later.

But astonishingly, among the 222 couples who took the course and got married, there were only five divorces and two separations in a decade, a success rate of the program of 97 percent. "The program," says McManus with justifiable pride, "is in fact marriage insurance."

A success rate of 97 percent in keeping marriages intact, compared with a national divorce rate of 51 percent? That's phenomenal. Not surprisingly, several U.S. cities have signed up for the Community Marriage Policies program that the McManuses have designed for community clergy leaders.

One tragedy of soaring American divorce rates over several decades is that increasing numbers of young people don't want to get married at all, choosing simply to live together. They think this will be a "trial marriage."

But as the University of Wisconsin's National Survey of Families and Households has shown, cohabitation is not "trial marriage" at all. It's actually "trial divorce." The divorce rate among people who live with each other before marriage is 50 percent higher than among those who don't.

What the McManuses have shown is that proper marriage preparation, especially like that of Marriage Savers, is the closest thing there is to marriage insurance.

Shouldn't all parents sign up their children for this? I think so.