

Marriage Savers 'Divorce-Proofing' Couples

In a time when many Americans accept that a 50 percent divorce rate is inevitable, some communities have found ways to nearly "divorce-proof" the marriages in their area.

One example is the Kansas City metro area. While the divorce rate in Kansas City, Mo. was going up between 1995 and 2005, just across the border in smaller Kansas City, Kan., the divorce rate was plunging.

Clergy on the Kansas side believe they know what made the difference. Pastor Jeff Meyers of Christ Lutheran Church in a Kansas City suburb was distressed with the devastating effects he was seeing as a result of marriages falling apart.

"If it fails, it's the pebble in the pond, the waves reverberate out and go on for generations," he told CBN News.

Research shows children of divorce still feel the pain of the breakup well into their adult life:

- Their chances of having their own marriages dissolve are doubled.
- Children of divorce are three times as likely to get kicked out of school or become unwed pregnant teens as are those children in intact families.
- Their chances of being physically abused are 14 times higher.
- Their chances of living in poverty five times higher.

Where's the Church?

Since some 80 percent of couples get married in a church, Meyers realized pastors might have more power to strengthen marriages than most consider.

"I thought, 'Where's the church?' This is our issue. This is the thing we should be dealing with," Meyers said.

That's when Meyers began interacting with Mike and Harriet McManus of Marriage Savers. The Maryland couple pushes all sorts of methods for strengthening marriage, including getting as many religious leaders in an area as possible to band together and sign a Community Marriage Policy. With that, they pledge not to marry anyone in their houses of worship unless that couple takes a pre-marital inventory and holds pre-marriage sessions with a pastor or marriage mentors.

Meyers teamed up with Leroy Sullivan, the late pastor of the inner-city Bread of Life Church. The two came from different worlds, but felt the same urgency about dealing with the divorce crisis, and the failure of most churches to do so.

"We're so busy talking about 'Let's go to heaven,' we never teach people how to live on earth," Sullivan said.

"And it's important for pastors and churches to get into their minds how critical it is to invest in each and every union," Meyers added.

Divorce Rate Plunges 70 Percent

Meyers and Sullivan spent months recruiting dozens of other pastors in the Kansas City, Kan. area in 1996 to sign a Community Marriage Policy. And over the next 10 years, the town saw an amazing 70 percent plunge in the divorce rate – from 650 in 1995, to just 196 in 2005.

Both pastors feel a particularly strong method of strengthening marriages has been the use of marriage mentors – especially when it comes to working with couples who want to marry.

Dave and Rhonda DeFreece are members of Meyers' Lutheran church and have mentored couples for 14 years.

“You’re using your years of experience coupled with some training in listening skills and communication skills,” Dave said.

“The preparation process, lots of times, brings out areas that maybe they’ve never discussed before or thought about,” Rhonda said.

McManus recruited Patti and Victor Llewellyn to be mentors in Maryland. They agree it’s especially important for couples considering marriage to get some mentoring.

Patti said mentors can help them answer crucial questions, like, “Will you have the communication tools to give and take and find out how you’re going to work together?”

“How do we expect them to just pop into a healthy, interacting great marriage? It’s not going to happen. It takes help,” Victor added.

These “marriage coaches” can help couples work their way through a premarital inventory, which can predict with 80 percent accuracy which couples will likely divorce. That can lead incompatible couples to give up on getting married before it’s too late.

“I know we’ve had two couples decide not to marry,” Patti mentioned.

How to Cut the Divorce Rate in Half

Pastors in more than 220 communities have signed Community Marriage Policies. But McManus feels it’s now time to start pushing secular authorities as well to do something to strengthen marriages. He’s championing a couple of potent ideas in his new book “How to Cut America’s Divorce Rate in Half.”

The U.S. rate is triple that of France and Britain, and Mike McManus thinks one big reason is because of the waiting

periods for a divorce in those nations.

"You have to wait five years in one country and six years in the other to get the divorce. You know what happens in five years? A lot of reconciliation," he explained.

Meyers pointed out research that shows if those in a failing marriage would simply wait it out for five years, they'd likely see a big turnaround.

"Sixty-six percent of those couples will report a stronger, happier, wholesome marriage if they will just do that," he said.

Some researchers say 86 percent of couples who decide to stall a divorce for five years end up with happier, enduring marriages after those five years.

McManus would like to see all state legislatures institute waiting periods of at least two years before they'll grant a divorce.

No More No-Fault

He's also pushing to get rid of no-fault divorce for couples who have juvenile children and no history of adultery or abuse. His book documents that America went from having 639,000 divorces in 1969, the year of the first no-fault law, to more than a million by 1975. And the divorce rate has stayed that high since.

"What's called no-fault divorce is really unilateral divorce," McManus said.

He wants states to replace no-fault divorce with mutual consent divorce where both spouses have a say in dissolving a union.

"Here are two reforms, each one of which in many states could cut the divorce rate in half," he said confidently.

Divorce Costs All Taxpayers

The states could also save a huge amount of taxpayer dollars. Taxpayers cough up \$112 billion a year to pay the huge costs of families fragmenting, according to the Institute for American Values. McManus thinks the total might actually be closer to \$200 billion a year.

While only one percent of married women are in poverty, 24 percent of divorced women are.

McManus said of most of that 24 percent: "They're eligible for Medicaid and food stamps and earned income tax credit and subsidies for housing and day care and all that."

"That's what costs so much," he explained. "If you could cut the divorce rate, you'd be doing a great fiscal favor for taxpayers."

"It's a devastating thing. Divorce is within our communities, families, the lives of our children personally to societally," Meyers said.

Which is why those in the Marriage Savers movement feel so fiercely about it.

"I really believe that what we're doing is making eternal benefits for couples down the road," Maryland mentor Llewellyn said.

"Marriage really is the best solution for all the problems we have in society today," Sullivan said.

Sullivan has only had a couple of divorces in his church since his fellow pastors banded together in 1996.

As for Meyers' church, "I've had roughly a hundred weddings I've performed since then," he said. "I've had no divorces."

"If we have a culture promoting marriage, and if our churches

begin to capture the vision that they can be marriage savers, I think we could drive down this divorce rate nationally in half," McManus said.