

Church Divorce Rate Really Not Higher Than Secular Society

It's long been believed that half of America's marriages end in divorce and the problem is just as bad in the Church as the rest of the country.

But when Harvard-trained researcher Shaunti Feldhahn tried to find the actual research to prove those points, she couldn't. It started her on an eight-year odyssey to find the actual facts.

A Demoralizing Belief

The Atlanta-based researcher and author realized the widespread belief that marriage failure is as bad in the Church as the rest of the world demoralizes Christians and can even cause them to question their faith.

"For a pastor it means 'all my work doesn't mean very much,' " Feldhahn told CBN News. "For the average person in the congregation there's this subtle feeling like, 'If that's true: if on something as important as marriage, doing what the Bible says doesn't change anything, what does that mean about the Bible?'"

Virginia Pastor Daniel Floyd, with Fredericksburg's Lifepoint Church, has seen how this can hurt people's faith.

"Because a 50 percent divorce rate inside the church really just said the church makes no difference in your marriage," Floyd explained. "And that's quite an indictment of the church."

Christian psychotherapist Angel Davis said the belief half of marriages fail can even give people permission to give up.

“When you have something like a statistic like 50 percent, it gives you the option,” she told CBN News. “It becomes an option in your mind.”

The Good News

In her book, *The Good News About Marriage*, Feldhahn lays out what she found during her eight years of investigating the complicated, complex divorce statistics.

First, the divorce rate is way below 50 percent and much lower for those who attend church.

Feldhahn estimates the overall divorce rate for the country is around 31 percent. The studies of people who regularly go to church all show a much lower divorce rate for them.

“Maybe 15 percent, maybe 20 percent for all marriages. First marriages, second marriages, third marriages,” Feldhahn explained.

Feldhahn cited one example where a pastor tracked 143 couples who he had married.

“It was 25, 27 years later. Less than 10 percent had been divorced,” she stated.

Feldhahn hopes these facts she’s uncovered become widespread.

“Pastors need to know this,” she said. “People need to be able to look around the average congregation and say, ‘You know what, most of these people will have strong and happy marriages for a lifetime. Doing what God says matters. This is a big deal to know.’”

Lasting a Lifetime

So where do things go from here? For one, pastors and counselors can now say with assurance, marriage makes sense and is likely to last a lifetime.

For religious believers, if they'll be attentive to practice their faith with their spouse, they can almost double their odds of avoiding divorce.

Therapist Davis said this could go a long way to erasing the doubt that Christianity makes no difference. "That there's no power in it to transform. And that is just not true," she insisted. "So those statistics I think could help a lot with that belief."

Pastor Floyd believes it'll be a major plus for the faith when this new knowledge gets around.

"If you have regular church attendance, then it's going to make a difference in the longevity of your marriage," he said. "I think that is incredible firepower, so to speak, for the local church, for the pastor."

Divorce Proof Marriages

Feldhahn told CBN News she's personally seen the power of this new information immediately pump up a congregation's faith.

"You hear this gasp go through the congregation, and everybody starts applauding, and it's like you can see hope coming back into their eyes," she said.

Shaunti's husband Jeff explained such hope can be crucial in helping a couple actually survive.

"Shaunti and I have had tough patches," he admitted. "But we never once thought that we weren't going to make it. We knew we were going to. So you work through the tough patches and you move on to the other side. And the other side is always good."

Feldhahn stated people can make other choices to divorce-proof their marriage.

"People who decide not to live together before they get

married, that has been proven to have a really good effect on the marriage,” she said as an example. “And so you might get down to the 5, 10 percent divorce odds.”

Now Feldhahn and others hope people will spread the word.

“To be able to get this information into other people’s hands quickly,” she said, “I really think we can change the paradigm from discouragement to hope.”