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The Church's Greatest Untapped Outreach Opportunity

Congregations today do not look like the congregations of yesterday. Divorce, remarriage, cohabitation, single parents, and singles have changed your church forever.

Key Questions for Every Church Leader

- How many marriages have you had in your church in the past 12 months?
- How many divorces have you had in your church in the past 12 months?
- How many of these individuals/spouses still attend your church regularly (at least two Sundays a month)?
- How many children are represented in these families?
- How many of these children still attend your church regularly (at least two Sundays a month)?
- What ministries are impacted by their absence and lack of volunteerism?
- What is the financial impact due to the loss of these couples/families?
- How many single parents do you have in your church?
- How many couples in your church are living together, outside of marriage (cohabiting)?

Reflect on the above questions and ask yourself...

What is the real impact of fractured families on my church?

Building Healthy Marriages and Strong Families

The purpose of this document is two-fold. First, we want to bring awareness to what is happening culturally in marriage, family and church life. Secondly, we will offer ideas that will help focus on the “bright spots” of what is working to bring about positive, healthy changes in the marriages and families in your congregation. Ultimately our goal is to see you and your congregants thrive in the calling God has placed on you. *The solutions are simple, but the impact is life changing!*

1. The Decline of Marriage and Family

Marriage is declining as an institution and it is affecting the family. The United States is the most divorcing society in the world, the U.S. Census Bureau reported in 2009 and 2010:

- 2.1 million marriages a year
- 1 million divorces a year
- 85% of Americans marry at least once
- 15 million individuals cohabiting
- 1 million children affected by divorce each year
- 48% of American households are married
- 1/5 of households were “traditional” families—
married couples with children
(Tavernise, New York Times, 2011)

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Cohabitation:

- 60% of all marriages are preceded by some form of cohabitation (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008)
- Marriages preceded by cohabitation have a 65% greater chance of divorce (Binstock and Thornton, 2003)

Likelihood of abuse for children not living with both biological married parents:

- Mother and boyfriend..... 11 times greater
- Cohabiting biological parents.....4 times greater (Sedlak, 2010)

Three-fourths of children who live with both unmarried parents will see them break up **before they reach age sixteen**, compared to only a third of children born to **married parents.**

(Popenoe & Whitehead, 2002)

2. The Decline of the Church

Is the church as you know it dying? Just as the institution of marriage is decreasing in numbers, institutionalized religion is decreasing in relevance, importance, and participation across the United States.

Who sits in your pews?

- Married couples with or without children
- Step-families
- Single parent families (never married)
- Cohabiting families
- Divorced parents with or without custody
- Grandparents raising grandchildren

It is increasingly difficult and rare for those in non-nuclear families to be involved regularly and consistently in the church.

Church attendance on a weekly/regular basis:

- Self-reported general population..... 39%
(2008-2013) (Gallup, 2013)
- Single parents not attending regularly..... 67%
(Carepoint, 2011)

3. How Divorce Affects the Church

Divorce is affecting churches in multiple ways and crosses over multiple ministries. Think through the ripple effect of what happens when just one couple gets divorced in your church.

- Lose the spiritual influence (discipleship) of one spouse and most of the time both
- Lose the spiritual influence on their children
- Lose volunteerism of each spouse and their children
- Lose influence on both spouses' friends, neighbors and extended family
- Lose influence on their children's children, generational impact
- Lose the tithes and offerings of possibly both spouses, affecting financial stability of the church
- Increased number of individuals needing financial assistance from the church
- Church attendance declines (including friends and family who "take sides" and leave)
- Church's impact in the community declines, decrease in outreach

Give ***marriages and families*** the chance for a higher ***success*** rate by investing in them from the beginning, rather than spending time later ***picking up the broken pieces.***

4. Healthy Marriages + Strong Families = Vibrant Churches

Healthy families have five distinct qualities that correlate closely to the same qualities in healthy churches (Tom Lane, 2008).

Healthy families:

- Typically have offspring
- Have a definite sense of purpose
- Know how to express affection
- Are together for the long haul
- Have a level of intimacy where thoughts, feelings, emotions, and desires are shared

How can healthy marriages and strong families benefit your church?

- More invested in the church's ministries and outreach
- Volunteers increase
- Serve for longer periods of time
- Represent your church well to other members, visitors, and community
- Giving capacity increases for married couples

Median household net worth:

Married couple \$132,000

Divorced individual \$ 33,670

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- Regular churchgoers are 35-50% less likely to divorce than non-attenders (Turvey and Olson, 2006)
- Act as stabilizing role-models to the congregation, small groups, and communities (Barna, 2004)
- Useful resource to help marriages who may be struggling (Christianity Today International, 2006)

5. The Church's Role in Building Healthy Marriages and Strong Families

What is the church's role in building healthy marriages and strong families? More than any other institution, the church is equipped to help people at significant milestones in their lives such as:

- The birth of a child
- Dedication/Baptism of a child
- Developmental years (Elementary Sunday School)
- Adolescent years (Student Ministries)
- College years (College Program)
- Premarital training (reduces divorce rate by 30%) (Carroll and Doherty, 2003)
- Marriage
- Parenting
- Troubled marriages
- Illness or death of a family member
- Loss of job

During this time, people are looking for wisdom, counsel, encouragement, and a “trusted person who cares.” For all intents and purposes, the church still acts as the primary gatekeeper for marriage and family, and can aid in preparing, supporting, and enriching the quality of both.

Start early because:

- 78 of 1,000 teens (age 15-19) were mothers and 20% of births to those teens were women who were already mothers (National Center for Health Statistics, 2003-2004)
- 62% of young adults believe that “living together with someone before marriage is a good way to avoid an eventual divorce” (Cherlin, 2009)

The family presents what may be ***the greatest untapped evangelistic opportunity*** before the Church today. What is at stake is **the salvation of millions of children** under the evangelistic and discipleship ministry of fathers and mothers in the home. This is not the only mission field to be sure, but it is ***perhaps the most neglected mission field*** before the Church in our time.

(Brown, 2012)

The church is in a key position to help parents teach and evangelize the next generation, before they reach their teen years, to build their lifestyles based on biblical standards, truth, and not the ever-changing distorted cultural view.

6. A Simple Solution - Celebrate Marriage and Family!

Rather than setting out to fix all the negative things happening in marriage and family, start a campaign to celebrate what is working in your congregation. Begin by encouraging your entire church to start habits that will benefit their marriages and families. Each week have something that will bring attention to marriage and family through a positive tip, challenge, or story.

Here are some suggestions for ways to get started:

- Celebrate marriage and family on a regular basis and share positive stories from your congregation
- Once a month share a written or verbal story of a marriage that is working from the pulpit, in the bulletin, or through social media
- Celebrate anniversaries, and newly married couples each month
- Challenges from the pulpit:
 - ~ Eat dinner together as a family 3 times this week
 - ~ If you are married, pray with your spouse 3 times this week
 - ~ If you are a parent, pray with your children 3 times this week
 - ~ If you are married, go on a double-date with a younger couple to share life and encourage them
 - ~ Have regular date nights with your spouse
 - ~ Catch your child doing something right and encourage them with praise
 - ~ Find out the love language of your spouse and children at:
5LoveLanguages.com/profile

- ~ Hug your spouse and children every day
- ~ Write a note telling your spouse or child something you appreciate about them
- Suggest a movie night with popcorn, drinks, and all “the works” for couples at the church
- Place posters and banners around the church reminding everyone to “Celebrate Marriage and Family”
- At baby dedications ask the couples to commit to strengthening their marriage so their children will see a godly marriage modeled for them

People need to be encouraged and reminded to **do the right thing**. Watching others succeed is motivating and contagious. There are plenty of bright spots that you can focus on and use to **encourage others** who need to hear that marriage does work and families can be strong. Don't worry about fixing it all...start small, and watch as the contagious **flames of success are fanned into a fire** that spreads throughout your church.

7. Getting the Message Out

- Social Media:
 - ~ Facebook
 - ~ Twitter
 - ~ Instagram, etc...
- Traditional Communication:
 - ~ Sermons
 - ~ Small Groups
 - ~ Newsletter
 - ~ Bulletin
 - ~ General Announcements
 - ~ Pre and Post Service PowerPoint slides
 - ~ Video Stories
 - ~ Text Messaging

8. Your Next Steps

- Take the time to understand who sits in your pews
- List the needs of the largest 3-5 segments of your congregation
- Ask some of your staff what they feel the needs are in your congregation
- Make a list of what your church really does well
- Contact the AMFM office and ask us how we can help

Building healthy marriages and strong families truly is at the front line of strengthening the church and evangelizing the world!

For more information on how your church can encourage healthy marriages and strong families, please contact The Association of Marriage and Family Ministries at 480.718.3020 or Staff@AMFMOnline.com

The Association of Marriage and Family Ministries (AMFM)

AMFM was founded in 2003 and exists to train and equip churches in marriage and family ministry. Over the years, we have divided this ministry into three core areas: Prepare, Enrich and Restore. During this time we stepped out to find the best resources working in churches.

As time passed, the church has educated us on what they needed to best serve their marriages and families. In light of this, we have developed some great partnerships and created some of our own training programs.

Our ministry partners bring a depth of experience and resources to our organization. At AMFM we have all these resources at our finger tips: healthy relationship skills, dating, premarital education, marriage education and enrichment, re-marriage, couples in crisis, reconciliation, parenting, step-families, single parents, and much more.

For churches that want a launching point for couples' ministry we offer our Couple-to-Couple Marriage Mentoring and Life-on-Life for Couples trainings/workshops, ideal for small group leaders too. These two programs train couples to walk life with another couple. They encourage and enrich each other through highly trusted and structured relationships, with boundaries.

For churches that would like to build healthy marriages and strong families, we have our Marriage and Family Ministry Made Simple training. This process is customized to a church's individual needs and can be used as a self-taught resource for churches of all sizes.

The Great Commandment

Matthew 22:37-39 (ESV)

37. And He said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38. This is the great and first commandment. 39. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The Great Commission

Matthew 28: 19-20a (ESV)

19. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20a. Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you..."

Our commitment is to serve churches. We believe strongly that healthy marriages and strong families create strong/vibrant churches, impacting the world for Christ.

For more information on our ministry, partners, and resources please call 480.718.3020 or email: Staff@AMFMOnline.com.

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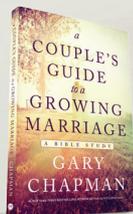
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- Brown, 2012



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