

First Steps to Launch a Marriage Ministry

*Marriage Ministry Models
Created by California Healthy Marriages Coalition*





First Steps to Launch a Marriage Ministry Introduction to How to Launch & Expand a Marriage Ministry

Overview

Nothing can shake up your church's mission, outreach and future growth more than divorce.

If half the married couples in your congregation divorced, how would it affect the church? Tithing, volunteerism, lay leadership, church attendance would all drop ... significantly! Demand for financial assistance, childcare, and more of your time through pastoral counseling would all increase ... significantly.

Make your church less vulnerable by proactively focusing on improving the health and quality of your congregation's current and future marriages. Start a Marriage Ministry!

How do we know that setting up a Marriage Ministry at your church will make a difference?

In January 2008, California Healthy Marriages Coalition (CHMC) contracted a research firm to survey 2,005 Californians on marriage, divorce, and Marriage Education.

Marriage Education is the product Marriage Ministry delivers, and here's what Californians think about it:

- Twenty-percent of California adults have "participated in a relationship or marriage education program."
- Of those who attended a program, 94% found the information they received helpful.
- 70% of Californians believe the church should do more to provide premarital and marriage enrichment.
- 78% of regular church-goers believe their congregation should do more to provide programs to help couples who are experiencing difficulties in their marriage.
- Half of California adults (50%) who have not ever attended a relationship or marriage education program would consider attending a class.

Church-goers want Marriage Ministry. Those who've attended Marriage Education classes confirm that it works. And half of those who've never attended Marriage Education would if it were made available to them.

As a pastor, you're busy and probably have too much to do already. And while there are other church priorities that you are working on right now, your church cannot afford to delay starting a Marriage Ministry much longer.

But you don't have to do it alone. CHMC is willing to help you and your church launch a Marriage Ministry.

Why? CHMC is passionate about divorce-proofing your congregation, your community and our state. CHMC also has financial resources to make it happen. In 2006, CHMC received the nation's largest Healthy Marriage Demonstration Grant from the Administration for Children and Families, U.S Department of Health and Human Services to saturate California with Marriage Education and Relationship Skills classes.

Marriage Education is the best divorce prevention strategy there is. More than eight-in-ten Californian's (81%) believe that "divorce is a serious problem" in the nation.. You and your church can play a pivotal role in helping more marriages succeed, less divorces occur, and ultimately, more kids being raised by their married mom and dad. The state benefits, your community benefits, your church benefits, and children and adults benefit.

First Steps to Launch a Marriage Ministry is one of several resources CHMC has available to help you and your church start a Marriage Ministry. The First Steps are intended to save you time and resources as your congregation takes steps towards launching a Marriage Ministry.

Step #1: Establish a Marriage Ministry Team

A ministry is only as good as the people who run it. Before getting too far down the road, spend time recruiting people who can manage the ministry details and demands, and ensure the long-term success of the Marriage Ministry.

- **Find the right people first.** Recruit a team of passionate, capable individuals or couples (who are currently in a healthy marriage) to create a Marriage Ministry strategic plan, lead the Marriage Ministry classes, and coordinate Marriage Ministry programming. Team members should commit to serving the Marriage Ministry for at least one year and should have time availability to volunteer a minimum of six hours per month.
- **Get enough people to make it go.** Marriage Ministry Teams (MMT) can range in size from three to ten people, depending on the size of the congregation. MMT's made up of married couples should target to have between two to five couples.
- **Focus on the marriages that matter most.** The health of the marriages of the MMT is important. It is not necessary for the MMT to have perfect marriages but they must have healthy marriages. While in the recruiting phase, use the Couples Checkup at CaMarriage.com, an online relationship inventory powered by Life Innovations (the makers of Prepare/Enrich) to assess the health and quality of the MMTs marriages. It's quick and easy to use. Once the Couples Checkup is completed by each spouse, an assessment is created and emailed to the couple (and pastor) with practical ways to keep relationship strengths strong and ways to improve relationship growth areas.
- **Figure out what everyone can do.** The skill set of team members is important to evaluate as well. While all members of the MMT should have a combined passion for strengthening marriages, a variety of skills and talents are necessary for the long-term success of the Marriage Ministry at the church. Different team members should be able to do some or all of the following: administrate details, convey excitement in front of groups of people, lead classes, greet people and make them feel welcome, develop promotional materials, coordinate programming details, and motivate and recruit volunteers.

Step #2: Determine Marriage Ministry Objectives and Goals

Set up the MMT for success. Let them know the scope, scale, and purpose of the Marriage Ministry. Without clear objectives and goals, enthusiasm and motivation can quickly turn into discouragement and burnout. Here's how to keep your MMT focused and motivated.

- **Decide who the MMT is reaching out to.** Is it the members of the church, couples in the community, or a combination of both? Knowing "who" they are serving allows them to better determine the what, where, when, why and how for planning purposes.
- **Alleviate confusion before it can happen.** The roles and responsibilities of the MMT should be clearly defined in relation to the pastor/pastoral staff. Every congregation has internal processes and the MMT should have full knowledge of the following: decision making process, annual program budget, and processes, method for pastor-MMT ministry updates, program calendar and room requests, and promotional capabilities.
- **Pay special attention to the calendar.** The best time to launch marriage-based programs is the Fall (Sept to Nov) and Winter-Spring (Jan to May). The MMT should promote classes at least six weeks before the class or event, and ensure there are no schedule conflicts within the church, and no major events occurring in the community.

- **Keep expectations in check.** As great of an idea as Marriage Ministry is, it is a fairly new concept in people's minds. Couples in the congregation and community will need time to evaluate their level of interest in attending a class, their time availability, and if applicable, child care issues. Every couple in the congregation will not be able to attend all of the Marriage Ministry events. Set up modest attendance goals when starting a Marriage Ministry.

Step #3: Diagnose the Needs the Marriage Ministry Will Meet

It is common knowledge that all couples need regular marriage enrichment, all marriages go through different seasons, and most couples experience similar relationship challenges. Assessing the specific needs of couples in your congregation and community ahead of time will result in better planning, focused implementation and more successful results.

- **Ask couples what they want and need.** Give people what they want, and the chances of their showing up to a class are much greater. So with that in mind, survey couples on issues they're dealing with in their marriage, topics they're interested in, and relationship skills they lack. This can be done before, during, or after Sunday service, through e-mail, or through a letter campaign. The feedback from couples in the congregation will provide the MMT with ample input on how best to launch the Marriage Ministry.
- **Pick how much the MMT will be doing.** While the term Marriage Ministry seems straightforward, it can be broadly defined to include a wide range of ministry focuses including premarital ministry, pastoral care for couples, step family support groups, and more. California Healthy Marriages Coalition advocates a 3-Part Marriage Ministry focus for congregations that include: premarital ministry, marriage enrichment, and ministry for troubled marriages. The reason for this is simple: offering these three ministry focuses will enable your church to meet the needs of most of the couples in and outside the church. (Refer to CHMC's Guide to Developing Your Marriage Ministry handout for more details on setting up a 3-Part Marriage Ministry.)
- **Choose a curriculum that meets your needs.** CHMC has a list of twenty different skills-based marriage education curricula (refer to CHMC's List of Marriage Education Curricula). The MMT can attain ownership and accountability in the Marriage Ministry by being part of the curriculum selection process.

Step #4: Plan the Marriage Ministry Work and Work the Marriage Ministry Plan

Sometimes ministry results fall short of expectations. After the fact, the "woulda, coulda, shoulda" second guessing begins and momentum and excitement fade quickly. Many of the hindsight insights could have been addressed ahead of time with thoughtful consideration and constructing a detailed plan.

- **Get leaders trained as soon as possible.** If the curriculum the MMT has chosen requires training for facilitators, make sure the team members plan enough time to fulfill the training requirements and for time to increase their comfort level with the material before teaching a class. Find train-the-facilitator workshops in California at CaMarriage.com.
- **Lock in dates, times and locations.** The MMT should identify viable dates, rooms (in the church), and/or locations (outside the church building) to host Marriage Ministry classes and events. Even if all the details aren't totally confirmed, it is easier to cancel a reservation than be declined due to lack of availability. In addition, the MMT should identify times, days and locations for regular meetings as a team, as well as update meetings with the pastor who oversees the Marriage Ministry.
- **Figure out the registration process.** The MMT needs to think through all the details surrounding the registration process. No one gives it much thought when it runs smoothly. But it can create time-consuming headaches for everyone when it doesn't. Issues to keep in mind are the methods of registering (by mail, in person, fax, email, online form), payment methods (cash, check, credit card), incentives to register (early bird registration discount), amount to charge for event,

registration confirmation, day-of registrations, contact information for inquiries, and a cancellation process. All the pieces of the registration process need to be thought through and resolved.

- **Keep the end in mind.** What is the ultimate goal of the Marriage Ministry? If it is reduced to reaching an attendance goal, recouping the financial costs, or to “just do something” for marriages then the writing is on the wall for the MMT. If the goal is to help couples thrive in their marriages, then the MMT will stay encouraged that their contribution is making a difference in the world. And that can be the best motivation there is.
- **Revitalize the relationships of those who give the most.** Sponsoring Marriage Education classes or events can be physically and emotionally draining (managing details, handling registrations, setting up and tearing down, dealing with criticism, and juggling childcare issues). Make sure the MMT is working as a team during the peak times, and playing like friends during the off-peak times. While they spend much of their spare time investing in the marriages of others, give them opportunities and encouragement to invest in their own.

Step #5: Spread the Word about the Marriage Ministry

So, you’ve got a MMT, a strategic plan, a Marriage Ministry event or class. While some subscribe to the “if we build it they will come” theory, reality shows that no one will show up unless they’ve heard about it. Marketing the Marriage Ministry, and more importantly, the Marriage Education classes and programs, are essential to ensure marriages improve.

- **Give people something to look at.** Create a marketing strategy that includes print and online promotional pieces. People are inundated with many different messages vying for their attention. A brochure, a poster, an electronic image can inform, remind, and persuade couples to attend the Marriage Ministry class or event. CHMC has designed four-color brochures and posters for 10 Great Dates (English and Spanish) and Mastering the Mysteries of Love (English, Spanish, and Korean) which are available for free for download at www.CaMarriage.com.
- **Never underestimate the power of a search.** Promote your Marriage Ministry and Marriage Education classes online through the church’s website, because you never know who is viewing the web site. Don’t forget to add ads on the church’s MySpace page, Facebook profile and other online social networks. One of the best ways to advertise the Marriage Education classes is at www.CaMarriage.com which has a free Marriage Education class locator where thousands of visitors search for ME classes every month.
- **A personal invitation can go a long way.** Get in front of as many people as possible at the church (main service, Sunday School classes, small groups, daycare parents, etc) and in the community (Kiwanis, Rotary, other clubs) with information about the Marriage Education classes the church offers, and a personal invitation for the audience to invest in their own marriages and attend the class.
- **Spread the word through others.** Word of mouth is always the best form of advertisement. Encourage couples who attended a Marriage Education class to let others know about their experiences and how their marriage improved. They can tell friends and family through word of mouth, their MySpace page, their blog, and their Facebook profile. Give couples an opportunity to share in front of the congregation.

Conclusion

Considering all of the programs and activities a church can offer, Marriage Ministry provides the best return on investment for the congregation. Keeping marriages together and families intact provide stability for the congregation that cannot be replicated. As your church takes the first steps to launch a Marriage Ministry, CHMC has several more write-ups to further help you establish an effective Marriage Ministry that has a long term impact on strengthening marriages and reducing divorce.

