

## The Marriage Conference Model

Jim Healy, Ph.D., Center for Family Ministry,  
Diocese of Joliet  
815-838-5334 / jhealy@dioceseofjoliet.org

I believe our married couples need three things in order to flourish: the Catholic Christian **vision** of marriage, **skills**, especially communication and conflict resolution skills, and **support** – from other couples, from the church, and from the community. There is an illustration of this on the accompanying sheet. You can see what I'm saying by looking at the illustration of vision, skills, and support. You might think of these three components of marriage enrichment as the kind of graphic equalizers we see on stereos, like treble and bass that go up and down for various songs. In the same way, various marriage enrichment efforts have different levels of these three components. And in my opinion, that's fine, so long as the overall array of enrichment opportunities in a particular community combine, to fill up all three levels. My job is to talk about how marriage conferences fit in here – what strengths and weaknesses do they have? I'd like to use this framework to do it.

How would I describe a marriage conference? For the purposes of this discussion, I would describe a marriage conference as an event that lasts a day or less, and which can maintain its effectiveness, no matter how many couples participate. There are other marriage enrichment vehicles that probably have a maximal size, beyond which it is harder for them to function well. Not so with the marriage conference – adding more couples is no detriment and, indeed, probably increases its effectiveness. In addition, the marriage conference depends on a charismatic, compelling, or magnetic speaker: somebody who combines, passion, knowledge and presentation skills. This model also employs the talents of such a person to their best effect.

Third, the focus is not so much on intimate interaction between the couples during the conference, but on an intense interaction between the speaker (or speakers) and the couples, and intense inner work. Other models may create more intensive interactions between the couples, but there are many couples who are not up for that much intensity at any particular point, and who would not come if it were required. Much of the work of the couples happens after the conference.

Now, where does the Marriage Conference fall in terms of the three components of vision, skills, and support? In terms of getting across the Catholic Christian vision of marriage, it is **high** – the vision can be presented in a compelling way by a gifted speaker.

In terms of skills, we would have to put it lower – perhaps two bars, or sometimes three. You can talk about some basic skills, but there is not really time for much practice or integration of skills. However, it does have an effect, because many people will never go to the longer skills program, and they get some insight about

communication skills from the marriage conference. In other words, if you fluoridate the water, you can have some effect on people who never go to the dentist.

As for support, I would give marriage conferences a middle grade. It does not offer the kind of support that an ongoing couples' support group offers, but there is a very real sense of support that comes from a large gathering, a sense of solidarity and deeply felt shared mutual meaning. In that way, it might be similar to the kind of feeling a bishop feels as a chrism mass, or a priest celebrant feels at the Easter vigil. There is a powerful sense of validation, of mission, and of common purpose.

Now, you might be thinking about how other types of marriage enrichment might fall regarding these three categories in there, and obviously, they all have their strengths. I would only point out that some activities that we don't often consider marriage enrichment can have that effect. For instance, many couples who go to bible study together report that it strengthens their marriage, probably through increasing their grasp of the Christian vision, and also perhaps through receiving a certain amount of support. Similarly, a couple who attends a really good parish Mardi Gras celebration, perhaps along with their kids, finds it strengthens their marriage by more firmly embedding them in a community of support.

So, how do we have a good marriage conference? I've spoken in perhaps 60 dioceses, to large audiences and to relatively small groups, and I've noticed a few things. With some exceptions, our expectations are relatively modest. Many places would be delighted to get 25 or 50 couples. I am aware, however, that our evangelical brothers and sisters hold one-day marriage conferences where they can gather 2,000, 4,000 or perhaps up to 8,000 couples at a time. Now, numbers aren't everything, but remember, the marriage conference is set up so it can do as good a job with 5,000 couples as with 50 couples, so why not go for the greater harvest?

A few years ago, I tried to make a more careful study of these evangelical Christian marriage enrichment organizations, one of the most successful ones in particular, and I realized that they differed from us in how they approached conferences in a number of different ways. I would like to enumerate these, but put them under three different phases: preparation, presentation, and follow-up.

#### Preparation:

Sometimes a "missionary" goes into a particular city as much as a year in advance to begin preparing for a large conference. They may be financially supported by the organization, and/or they may be supported by a number of individuals from whom the missionary has asked for support. He or she then begins a process, which reminds me of the old Chicago "ward boss" approach, or you might call it the community organizing approach. They work intensively at cultivating parish leaders, and forming a community of leaders for mutual support and challenge. Each lead couple is challenged to "turn out the vote" from their particular church, with a very detailed plan of what to do 16 weeks before the event, 12 weeks before, etc. Supporting this

very intensive person-to-person recruitment is advertising of the very highest quality – print, radio, and sometimes television.

### Presentation

The venues are of the highest quality, helping to generate an expectation of excellence: large auditoriums, or indoor stadiums where major league sports team play. A professional entrance fee is charged. When I attended one about five years ago, it was, I believe, \$68 a person, or \$136 per couple. If even 2,000 couples attend, that is 272,000 dollars. The record of this group is about 9,000 couples, which would provide revenue of about 1 and a quarter million dollars. You can afford to put people in place a year in advance, have top advertising, and rent an excellent location with that kind of capital. There are often a good number of speakers, all very good, and ample use is made of musicians, choirs, and shared prayer. There is an MC, there are often computer graphics and power point support, and there might be filmed or live skits. There is a nicely done booklet or workbook for the day, which matches the advertising materials in professionalism. There are lots of books and CDs available for purchase at the breaks, and lunch is often provided.

### Follow-up

If you are going to go to all the trouble of putting such a conference together, why do it only once? Hold another one a year later in the same city, and encourage all who came to the last one to send or perhaps pay for another couple to attend this time. Hold a free “alumni” gathering the night before the conference, with a different speaker. Capture as many e-mail addresses as possible, and stay in touch with the couples after the conference. Sell books, CDs, and DVDs that can continue what was started. Tell about other types of marriage enrichment activities coming up locally, and remind them when these events are coming up.

Now, I’m not saying we have to duplicate all these activities, or even that we should. We have our unique approaches, too. But there are things we can learn, especially from the boldness of spirit that surrounds these efforts.

You only have to look through the NACFLM directory to find a lot of people who speak on marriage, at least locally, but I think there are additional individual lay people, couples, and clergy who are springing up in this area, many of them no doubt committed to presentations regarding the Theology of the Body, but not limited to only that approach. We want to support boldness with boldness, if we can.

There is something else about marriage conferences. Because of their size, they have the ability to influence more couples than many other approaches can, other than perhaps mass media campaigns. They can be effective in themselves, but they can also act as the wide end of the funnel, as pictured on the accompanying paper. Many people are attracted to conferences who can then be encouraged to go deeper. Two

days ago, I gave a two-hour program, which was hosted by the local Marriage Encounter community, who were able to say to the couples afterwards, “Did you like what you experienced? Would you like a lot more of it? Come to Marriage Encounter.” Last summer, I spoke at an Air Force base, which was going to hold a PREP series a few weeks later. I include enough information about skills, such as the four traps of communication, that I was able to say, “If you liked this, come to the PREP training later this month.” In addition, my hope is always to encourage ongoing couples’ support groups to form, and my CDs and accompanying materials are intended to support this.

In conclusion, let me just say that the harvest is plenty; let us continue to recruit and support the laborers. Thank you.