

Supporting Documentation for A Christian Declaration on Marriage

Prepared by Michael J. McManus

Marriage In America Is Disintegrating

There has been an alarming disintegration of marriage in America:

1. Divorces tripled from 1960 and 1979, rising from 390,000 to 1,181,000. By 1997, they declined only 1.5% to 1,163,000. More marriages now end in divorce than death.
2. The marriage rate fell 35% between 1970 and 1998. Only 56% of U.S. adults are married today, down from 73%. There are only 2.38 million marriages a year.
3. Cohabitation skyrocketed 10-fold, from 430,000 in 1960 to 4.26 million living together in 1998. Cohabitation is the dominant way male-female unions are formed, not marriage.
4. Cohabitation is a double cancer for marriage. The first cancer is that for millions, cohabitation is a substitute for marriage. A quarter of unmarried women aged 25-39 are currently living with a partner, and an additional quarter have done so in the past. Yet what many call a "trial marriage" should be called a "trial divorce." The only question is whether they break up before the wedding or afterward. Of 100 couples who begin living together 40 break up before a wedding, according to the University of Wisconsin. One result: the number of never-married couples has doubled from 21 million in 1970 to 46.5 million in 1998, diverting 25 million from getting married at all. The second cancer is that cohabitation before marriage increases a couple's odds of divorce by 50%. So of the 100 cohabitating couples, 60 will marry, but 45 will divorce. That leaves only 15 couple still together after a decade!
5. Children of divorce suffer more than anyone from divorce. They are twice as likely to be in poverty or to commit suicide, and 12 times more likely to be incarcerated. Further, as Judith Wallerstein's powerful new book, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, makes clear the impact of divorce on kids "grows at least into the third decade." Based on interviews of 100 children of divorce over 25 years, she reports that "From the viewpoint of the children and counter to what happens to their parents, divorce is a cumulative experience. Its impact increases over time and rises to a crescendo in adulthood. In adulthood it affects personality, the ability to trust, expectations about relationships and ability to cope with change. Anxiety leads many into making bad choices in relationships, giving up hastily when problems arise, or avoiding relationships altogether."

Good News: Marriage is the Key to Happiness, Long Life, Wealth!

As Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher point out in their important new book, *The Case For Marriage*, married people are healthier, happier, wealthier, live longer and have better sex than those who divorce or remain single. Oddly, this is news to our culture. Thus, secular evidence backs up Scripture. "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'" (Genesis 2:18). Selected data in brief:

- Happiness: Married people are twice as likely as those who are single for whatever reason to say they are "very happy." Some 40% of married couples say they are very happy, compared to 15% of the separated, 18% of the divorced. What's surprising is that only 22% of the never-married and cohabitators are very happy, the same as widows.
- Life: A married man at age 48 has an 88% chance of living till age 65, but a divorced man has only a 65% odds of survival! A woman aged 48 who is married has an 92% chance of living to age 65; but a divorced woman's odds are only 82%. Divorced men are twice as likely to suffer from heart attacks, cancer and four times as likely to be in automobile accidents or to commit suicide, reports J.J. Lynch in *The Broken Heart*.
- Wealth: A married couple in their 50's in 1994 had net assets of \$132,000, or \$66,000 per person. But a divorced person's assets are just \$33,600. Surprisingly, a never-married person has a net worth of only \$35,000; the separated, a pitiful \$7,600.

- Sex: “Married sex really is better sex,” report Waite and Gallagher. “Married women are almost twice as likely as divorced or never-married women to have a sex life that (a) exists and (b) is extremely emotionally satisfying.” Some 43 percent of married men had sex at least twice a week vs. only 26 percent of single men.

Churches Have Proven Answers

Some churches have developed reforms that are doing a better job preparing couples for a lifelong marriage, strengthening existing marriages or saving troubled ones. Catholics created strong premarital programs, but much post-marital pioneering has come from Protestants:

1. **Time:** For a generation, most Catholic dioceses have required a minimum time of marriage preparation – typically six months from the time a priest first meets with the couple, to the time a wedding can take place. During that time, many couples are asked to take a premarital inventory to give them an objective view of strengths and weaknesses and attend classes on such issues as communication and finances. The results of better marriage preparation is clear in a recent George Barna survey showing Catholics have America’s lowest divorce rate.
2. **Premarital Inventory:** There are two widely used premarital inventories, FOCCUS and PREPARE, taken by about 300,000 couples a year. Either can predict about 80% accuracy which couples will divorce. More important, a tenth of those who take either inventory, break their engagements. Studies show their scores are equal to those who marry and later divorce! As a result, those couples who break an engagement avoid a bad marriage before it has begun.
3. **Mentor Couples in Marriage Preparation:** At Fourth Presbyterian Church, (Bethesda, MD), Mike and Harriet McManus trained 52 Mentor Couples to administer a premarital inventory with seriously dating and engage couples. From 1992-2000 Mentors worked with 304 couples. About 50 broke off their relationship or their engagement – 16.5% of the total. Thus, those in weak relationships discovered it on their own and either broke up or strengthened their union. Mentors also taught couples how to improve communication and conflict resolution. Of the 250 who did marry there are only six known divorces in eight years, a failure rate of 2.4%.
4. **Marriage Encounter** has been attended by 1.6 million Catholic couples and 600,000 Protestants. After Lead Couples share intimate details of their marriage, attending couples write to each other on assigned topics and discuss them privately. The process encourages participating couples to communicate deeply. Sixty studies show that 80% to 90% of attendees fall back in love, and permanently improve the quality of their marriage. Family Life Weekends are another weekend retreat to strengthen marriages led by evangelicals.
5. **Retrouvaille** is a similar weekend retreat developed by Catholics. However the Lead couples are those whose marriages once nearly failed. These “back-from-the-brink” couples share details about how they overcame years of adultery, alcoholism, physical abuse, etc. to build great marriages. The results are stunning. Of 60,000 couples who attended, four out of five couples have rebuilt their marriages. In most areas Retrouvaille is held only 2-3 times a year.
6. **Marriage Ministry** is a similar proven way to save couples headed for divorce, but it is based in local churches. Rev. Dick & Phyllis McGinnis of St. David’s Episcopal Church in Jacksonville, Florida trained seven couples whose marriages nearly failed to help those now in trouble. One woman had been in an adulterous affair for eight years. A man was a bisexual who had homosexual affairs. Another man was an alcoholic who lost his job and was out of work two years. Yet they identified the 17 steps and all went through to save their marriages. They share their path of recovery with 40 troubled marriages, and saved 38 of them – a 95% success rate. Marriage Ministry has spread to 25 churches. In seven of them, 40 Mentor Couples have worked with 213 troubled marriages, and saved 193 of them. That’s a success rate of 90% in the transplants.
7. **Stepfamily Support Groups:** Some 46% of all marriages today involve at least one spouse who was previously married. Families with stepchildren are the most explosive in America – breaking up at a 65% rate. Stepchildren resent their new “parent” and often drive them away. Rev. Dick Dunn of Roswell United Methodist Church near Atlanta created a “Stepfamily Support Group” led by couples with truly blended families. Result: four out of five couples make it, the mirror opposite of usual failure. These groups have been planted in other churches.

The core idea of the best programs, summarized in one sentence:

In every church there are couples with good marriages who really could be of help to other couples, but have never been asked, inspired or trained to come alongside another couple and share their wisdom on how to make a marriage successful.

“Marriage Saver Churches”

One of the most exciting developments in recent years is to see the emergence of “Marriage Saver Churches” in all parts of America in many different denominations, which have virtually eliminated divorce! Christ Lutheran Church in Overland Park, KS, for example, a congregation of 1500 people, has had only two divorces in three years, couples who did not seek help. First Assembly of God of Rockford, IL invited the McGinnises to train 14 “back-from-the-brink” couples in their church to work with troubled marriages. Local therapists learned about Marriage Ministry and sent dozens of their toughest cases to First Assembly. In three years, the Mentors, whom they call “Marriage Savers,” have met with more than 100 marriages headed toward divorce, and save all but four of them. By contrast even Christian therapists save only 20% of the troubled marriages. Bread of Life, an inner city church in Kansas City, KS has had no divorces since training Mentors. The same is true of Killlearn United Methodist Church, a congregation of 2,500 in Tallahassee. Pearce Memorial Church in North Chili, NY has had only one separation in two years.

Divorces Plunge in 25 Cities with Community Marriage Policies

Divorces have plunged in 25 of 28 cities where its Community Marriage Policy has been established and data on divorce rates have been checked with county clerks. Nationally, U.S. divorces have fallen from 1,181,000 in 1979 to 1,163,000 in 1997, a decline of only 1.5% in 19 years. By contrast, they fell by 30% in Modesto, and 22% in Peoria in six years. More recent CMP cities are having even more dramatic results. Divorces fell 13% in both Evansville, IN and Dalton, GA in two years and by 19% in Chattanooga in three years. Divorces plunged in Kansas City, KS and two suburban counties from 1,530 in 1995 to only 1,034 in 1998, while divorces actually rose across the river in Kansas City, MO and its suburbs! El Paso’s divorces plummeted from 3,176 to 2,179. That’s a one-third decline in three years in both cities. Thus, divorces in both Kansas City and El Paso have fallen 22 times more than in the U.S. in about one-sixth of the time (3 years vs. 19 years), or 100+ times faster than in the U.S.

A National Strategy to Save Marriages

This is a nation of 300,000 churches. If only a third of them trained 10 couples to be Mentor Couples, there would be one million Mentor Couples. Surely, they could save half of the marriages ending in divorce. Is this a realistic possibility? Every church has couples who could help other couples at key stages of marriage. What God has joined together, the church should hold together. This is a new vision for the 21st Century Church - a noble reaffirmation of our common commitment to Jesus Christ.