



marriage

 **MINISTRY**

in the 21st Century:
The Encyclopedia of Practical Ideas

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Marriage Ministry in the 21st Century: The Encyclopedia of Practical Ideas

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how to use this resource

Welcome to *Marriage Ministry in the 21st Century: The Encyclopedia of Practical Ideas!*

If you're a pastor, counselor, marriage ministry director, or a layperson in charge of a marriage ministry program in your church, this book is for you! It's packed full of ideas on caring for marriages, family-building, retreats, date nights, outreach, events, and much more. In addition, the last few sections of the book cover some big topics you need to consider in marriage ministry, such as the importance of a marriage mentoring ministry, the challenges of working with second marriages and blended families, and some important counseling disciplines that can help you keep your sanity. In fact, we've asked some leading experts to contribute these sections, so look for their bylines.

Whether you want to build or already have a thriving marriage ministry in your church, you probably realize that marriage ministry differs from many programs or ministries. While you might plan activities, retreats, Bible studies, and special events for couples, you also minister to marriages in many other ways. For example, you probably work with engaged couples in your church before their weddings take place. You likely offer counseling and maybe even support groups for couples going through difficult times or considering divorce. Further, a big part of marriage ministry involves equipping all couples to maintain and grow healthy relationships in their homes, with their families, and of course, with each other. The ideas in this book hit on all of these areas, too.

In fact, while some of the ideas address what to do in a marriage ministry program setting in the church, many of the ideas cover what you might encourage couples to do in their homes and with their families. Thinking this way actually expands your marriage ministry—instead of looking at it as a program that some of the couples in your church take part in, you can think of marriage ministry as equipping all the couples in your church to have thriving marriages all the time—and that will certainly result in strengthening your whole church!

This book is a collection of practical ideas. While you can read it from cover to cover, it's designed as a reference tool. In the Contents listing, look up the area of marriage ministry where you need tips and ideas, and go from there.

We pray that this tool will help you build an effective marriage ministry as you serve Christ. May God bless you and your group!

—Brad Lewis, *Editor*

The Desperate Need for Effective Marriage Ministry

by Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott

Whether you know it or not, some people in your congregation are desperate for help. While they might not look particularly needy, countless couples on any given weekend file into churches across the country, looking their “Sunday best,” while quietly keeping their marriage problems to themselves. They might need help, but they feel too ashamed to ask for counseling. They might feel all alone, thinking no one else can understand what they’re going through. Or maybe they just have no one to talk to. Their marriages are hurting, and they’re not getting the help they need.

Truth be told, some of these couples are going down.

You’ve probably witnessed couples go through painful divorces where trouble was never suspected. You’ve certainly seen a newlywed couple, full of promise, experience a short-lived marriage because they didn’t get a solid start. And think of the numerous couples in your church who are stuck in a rut, not reaching their full potential.

How can you meet the needs of these couples? Chances are, you already do a lot: recommend good marriage books, facilitate couples’ support groups, sponsor marriage retreats or seminars, preach sermons on marriage, conduct marriage counseling, and make counseling referrals. Maybe you’ve even launched a marriage mentoring ministry to link seasoned and experienced couples with less-experienced couples in your congregation.

In other words, you’re probably already doing a great deal to meet the demanding needs of couples in your care. But if you’re like most pastors and marriage ministry leaders, you still scratch your head and ask: “Why isn’t this working better?” After all, the divorce rate in the church is no different than it is outside the church.

Why Typical Marriage Ministry Doesn’t Work

Why do so many couples have difficulties when your church does so many things to help them? Let’s look at two major reasons that the average marriage ministry efforts of local churches fall short.

First, pastors, marriage ministry leaders, and counselors are often overwhelmed with too many couples who need help. You have limited time to work with couples, and that means you need to place a limit on how many couples you can see. Whether you serve in a megachurch or a smaller church, your time is limited.

Second, pastors, marriage ministry leaders, and counselors don’t know which couples need help, because many couples in trouble won’t seek counseling. This second reason might be the more disheartening of the two, because the couples who need help the most are the least likely to ask for it. If you knew which couples to ask, they’d list a variety of excuses.

But most likely, they feel embarrassed. The shame and disgrace of needing help with marriage keeps far too many needy couples from allowing you to effectively minister to them.

That's why we're excited to present *Marriage Ministry in the 21st Century*. This resource is chock-full of new and innovative ways to minister to and meet the needs of today's couples.

For example, you'll find dozens of practical ideas for ministering to engaged couples and newlyweds, building stronger family relationships, helping couples find purpose and ways to meet each other's needs, reaching out to new couples, leading couples' Bible studies, planning marriage retreats, encouraging date nights, and much more.

Discovering What Your Marriage Ministry Needs

We've all heard the startling statistics of divorce—almost anyone can tell you that “almost half of all marriages end in divorce.” We're nearly immune to the numbers. But if you ask the people in your church to raise their hands if someone in their family or a close friend has suffered a divorce, almost every hand goes up. We all know something needs to be done.

We're here to say that something *can* be done! You can start by taking a quick inventory of the needs of people your current marriage ministry serves—as well as those it isn't reaching. Why? Because this raises your level of awareness, and awareness is a big part of the solution.

Every church, no matter how effective overall, does some things well and some things not so well. That's a way of saying that every church has plenty of room to improve. This certainly rings true in the area of marriage ministry.

So, take a moment to consider how well your church is doing to meet the needs of couples in your care. We've listed the top 15 issues couples look for help with from their churches. Simply place a check in front of those that the marriage ministry in your church provides.

We have concrete ways, readily known to people in our congregation, for helping couples:

- Conquer frequent conflict
- Move beyond financial pressures
- Dismantle power struggles
- Cope with busy schedules
- Ease work pressures that impact the home
- Find hope when struggling with infertility
- Navigate tumultuous relations with extended family
- Overcome sexual unfulfillment
- Cultivate spiritual intimacy
- Turn around communication meltdowns
- Triumphantly make it through a major illness
- Work through the devastation of an addiction
- Rebuild trust and love after infidelity
- Remain “husband and wife” while being “mom and dad”
- Balance the roles and responsibilities on the home front

So, how do the efforts of your church stack up? Can you check off most of these? Not if your church is like most churches. In fact, in one cycle of the typical church calendar, most churches squarely address only a small minority of these issues. Sure, we can all say that we let

people know about our counseling program, for example. But will a couple simply trying to cope with busy schedules, parenting, and a lack of spiritual intimacy seek counseling in your church? Unlikely. So what should our churches do?

It's Time We "Do Something"

One morning, near the turn of the 20th century, Bramwell Booth visited his elderly father, William Booth, founder of The Salvation Army.

"Bramwell, did you know that men slept out all night on the bridges?" William had arrived in London very late the night before from a town in the south of England and had to cross through the capital to reach his home. What he'd seen on his late-night journey prompted his question.

"Well, yes," Bramwell replied, "a lot of poor fellows, I suppose, do that."

"Then go and do something!" William said. "We must do something."

"What can we do?"

"Get them shelter."

"That will cost money."

"Something must be done. Get hold of a warehouse and warm it, and find something to cover them!"

That was the beginning of The Salvation Army shelters.

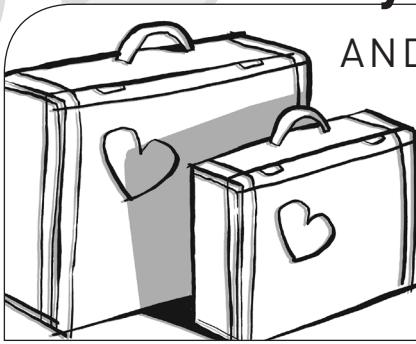
If William Booth were alive today, he might just have the same passion for "doing something" about the state of marriage.

Because you're reading these words, we know you have this kind of passion for marriage ministry. And we're thrilled to help you "do something" about it through the tips, suggestions, plans, and ideas of *Marriage Ministry in the 21st Century*.

Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott are co-founders of RealRelationships.com and the Center for Relationship Development at Seattle Pacific University. Their best-selling books include *Love Talk*, *Your Time-Starved Marriage*, and the award-winning *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*. Their work has been featured in *The New York Times* and *USA Today*, and they have appeared on *CNN*, *Good Morning America*, and *Oprah*. The Parrotts live in Seattle, Washington, with their two sons.

section **one**

twenty nights out AND WEEKENDS AWAY



Most married couples need more fun in their lives. As they go through the daily, weekly, monthly, and lifetime grind of dealing with work, family, and other relationships, they simply need time to reconnect.

Again, remember that marriage ministry is much more than a program you establish, maintain, and grow at church. Your ministry also includes equipping all married couples in your church to build and strengthen their relationships with each other, with their families, with God, and beyond the walls of their home.

The ideas in this section are written directly to couples, so you can talk about them in a Sunday school class or during a sermon on marriage. Or you can reprint them in your church newsletter. Just be sure to use them to help married couples have more fun, reconnect, and remind themselves of why they fell in love and got married in the first place!

10 DATE NIGHT IDEAS

Start simple! Encourage couples in your church to establish a regular date night once every week or two, or even once a month. Their goal? Have fun and rediscover each other—and do something besides “dinner and a movie.”

DATE 1 literary picnic



Most of us seldom have time to read more than daily paperwork, newspaper headlines, and e-mails. So enjoy a break from the norm and spend an evening reading together. Browse *The Sunflower* by Richard Paul Evans (Simon & Schuster) or *Dinner with a Perfect Stranger* by David Gregory (WaterBrook Press) for short book ideas.

Then pick a place where you can enjoy your evening of reading. Choose a park, a romantic overlook, a lakeshore, or a place that holds special meaning just for the two of you. Pick a date and make arrangements for child care.

When the day arrives, pack a large blanket, a flashlight or lantern for reading, comfortable clothes, cups, a Thermos of hot cocoa (enter “hot cocoa” in a search engine for thousands of variations), and a yummy dessert. To get beyond conversations of daily details, think of questions to ask each other on your way to the picnic. Questions can be serious or humorous.

no kids allowed!

If couples can't afford child care, combine these ideas with “Child Care Solutions” on page 145 or “Footloose and Fancy Free” on page 148.

At your picnic, focus on relaxing together with a good book, savoring your time and treats, and leaving the noise and demands of daily life behind you, even if only for a few hours.

If you need to stay closer to home, picnic in your backyard, or set up in your living room with a large blanket, candles to imitate starlight, and music for ambience. Soundtracks of the ocean, rainstorms, or mountain streams add to the atmosphere.

DATE 2 hide and seek



Hide and Seek has amused children for centuries—because it's fun! You don't have to be a kid to appreciate this rollicking pastime. Tweak the rules a bit, and you've got a playful game for you and your spouse.

Divide your home into “his” and “her” sections. These can be inside/outside, upstairs/downstairs, west wing/east wing—you get the idea. Each section is “off limits” to the other spouse until the hunt begins.

Hide secret treasures for your spouse in your section. These gifts can be as simple as handwritten coupons offering romantic rewards, like a jaunt in the Jacuzzi or dancing bare-foot in the backyard. Or you can purchase several small tokens of your affection to stash throughout your area.

If you decide to buy some of your surprises, make sure you're both operating on the same budget and have agreed on the same number of tokens. Think like a kid: It bugged you to get three gifts when your brother got six, even if yours cost more! Also, make sure the items you select are something your mate will enjoy.

Once the presents are planted, the party begins. Decide who goes first, and invite your mate into your section. As you search, point each other in the right direction by providing subtle or not-so-subtle clues: “You’re getting warmer...colder...*hot!*” When you find a hidden gift or note, open and act upon it immediately. This isn’t the time to offer a coupon for a candlelit dinner—unless, of course, you’ve already got it made and waiting!

The one way you can act like grown-ups is by savoring each discovery. Alternate turns back and forth to search for gifts. If something sparks discussion, a sentimental moment, or giddy passion, let your hearts be your guide.

treasure ideas

Wondering what to give? These ideas can kick-start your imagination:

- Piggyback ride
- Ice cream cone
- Pedicure
- CD or DVD
- Sponge bath
- Yo-yo

DATE 3 playful palettes

Add color and vibrancy to your relationship by learning to appreciate art. Explore a nearby art exhibit or museum.

Too stuffy? Don’t worry. Art encompasses so many themes and takes on so many forms that you can find something to appeal to your personalities. Art is also widely available. Nearly every community features some sort of art exhibit, from huge displays in Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art to student self-portraits displayed in hometown libraries.

Contact your chamber of commerce to see if any local organizations are hosting touring exhibits. Or hunt online by entering your city and state plus the words “art museums and festivals” in a search engine. Also check out Museums in the USA (www.museumca.org/usa/), an expansive Web site with links to the home pages of major museums in all 50 states.

When you arrive at the exhibit or museum, take a close look at intriguing images and objects, and allow plenty of time to pause, interpret, and absorb the messages a piece of art projects. How does it strike you? What does your spouse think? What pieces speak to you as a couple, reflecting positive aspects of your marriage? By the way, there are no right or wrong answers!

When you get home, express your own creativity. Clear off the kitchen table or another large, flat area. Fashion your own masterpiece, using your unique artistry and inspiration to express how you feel about your spouse. Use matte board and paints, poster board and watercolors, or construction paper and markers, or simply tear off a big sheet of white butcher’s paper and scribble with crayons. If you feel especially adventurous, bring out the finger paints!



DATE 4 name that tune

Husbands, if you want your wife to adore you, set aside the flowers and chocolates. Instead, simply take her by the hand and say, “Shall we dance?”

Ballroom dancing is romantic, and most women love it. When your wife tells her friends that you’ve invited her to take lessons, you can almost count on their response being, “I wish *my* husband would do that!”

So pick up the beat, fellas. You can salsa, swing, rumba, or line dance. Or perhaps you’d like the foxtrot, waltz, merengue, or country two-step. Whatever dance you choose, stay on your toes





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