

Going to the Chapel Before the Vows

Sarah Hunsberger, Portland Oregonian, June 06, 2005

When computer technician Dave Klusmann empties the dishwasher, he alternates the glasses right side up, then upside down, to fit more in the cupboard.

Debbie Klusmann, a first-grade teacher, shelves them all upright.

She remembers coming to tears over the chore early in their marriage.

But the couple was prepared to negotiate.

The Klusmanns, now married almost three years, were among the first couples in the Portland area to undergo mandatory premarital training as part of a church-based movement attempting to reduce divorce rates and strengthen marriages.

"One thing they taught us was to try to see from the other person's perspective," said Debbie Klusmann, 24. "Yeah," added her husband, 25. "See both sides."

Now cupboard organization depends on who unloads the dishwasher. "We've just kind of decided it's not worth bickering over," said Debbie Klusmann.

The marriage movement

In 2001, about 150 clergy in Clackamas County signed a commitment to provide premarital education to all couples married in their churches. Four years later, the Oregon City couple's marriage and scores of others are stronger.

The policy's effect on divorce is an open question: Since 2000, Clackamas County's divorce rate has declined 25 percent -- even more than church leaders had hoped. But the divorce rate has dropped even faster in Multnomah County, which does not have a widespread marriage policy among the county's churches.

Nationally, the divorce rate has been falling for more than two decades, reaching the lowest level since the early 1970s. One reason divorce rates are falling is that marriage rates are also in decline, both in Oregon and across the country. At the same time, about one-third of U.S. births in 2002 occurred outside marriage, the highest rate ever.

The real power of what is called the "marriage movement" may be more personal than political or statistical: It helps dedicated couples start off on the right foot and learn lifelong tools they can use to make their marriages last.

The Rev. Tom Hurt, pastor at Oregon City Evangelical Church, said his church has started getting calls from engaged couples who don't

attend the church but who have heard about the marriage preparation course and want to participate.

Now a group of churches in Multnomah County is developing a policy inspired by the one in Clackamas County. (About 20 churches signed a policy in the Gresham area three years ago, but it has gone mostly dormant.)

Pastors in Multnomah County plan to meet later this month to discuss the wording of the new policy. About 110 churches have expressed interest in joining, and proponents hope to have as many as 150 churches sign on by fall, said Charlie Goessler, a Northeast Portland pastor who is president of Marriage and Family Connections, the Multnomah County nonprofit group that is pushing for the policy.

Oregon's first marriage policy

Churches in the Corvallis-Philomath area developed Oregon's first marriage-support policy in 1997, followed by more than a dozen efforts in Salem-Keizer, Yamhill County, Clatsop County, Josephine County and elsewhere.

Tom Dressel, a volunteer who helped develop Clackamas County's policy, said that even though pastors have been enthusiastic, implementation has been slow. He and his wife, Liz, run Every Marriage Matters, a nonprofit that serves as an information clearinghouse for marriage support in Clackamas County.

Dressel said the amount of preparation offered by participating churches varies widely by congregation.

Some churches, such as Oregon City Evangelical, have a squadron of mentor couples standing at the ready. Each engaged couple gets assigned to mentors and works with them intensively, going through workbooks and meeting regularly before and after their wedding.

At New Hope Community Church in Clackamas, there's a special curriculum for second marriages and blended families.

Some churches, such as Oak Hills Presbyterian, don't offer mentors but have couples attend counseling sessions with the pastor. Many churches also offer premarital inventory tests that raise red flags about areas where a husband and wife might see things differently.

The church-centered counseling usually incorporates Bible teachings and prayer.

The Dressels said the training has led some couples to call off their weddings. That's good,

they said, because it prevents bad marriages before they start.

More Clackamas County churches have signed on to the policy since it began four years ago, bringing the total to 164. The effort involves both mainline Christian denominations and nondenominational community churches.

Some churches have declined to participate, saying the Clackamas County policy's definition of marriage as one man and one woman is a thinly veiled political statement against gay marriage.

"I think that when people define marriage narrowly in that way, it does not serve the institution of marriage in any way," said the Rev. Dana Worsnop of Atkinson Memorial Church in Oregon City. But Worsnop agrees that married couples and families need more support.

Goessler said he expects the Multnomah County effort to stay out of the political debate over marriage, but noted, "We're here to support traditional marriages."

Non-church training

Marriage training also is catching on outside of churches.

Stephen Ledyard, a marriage and family therapist in Bend who is not affiliated with a religious organization, said more people -- especially men -- are opening up to the idea of preparing for marriage or seeking help once their marriage hits some bumps.

He said more couples are signing up for the classes offered through the therapy practice where he works, the Three Rivers Center for Relationship.

"In the last few years, we have a lot more couples who come early on, before they get married, and it's been great to be able to help them," Ledyard said.

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