

More couples saying 'we do' to marital training

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OREGON CITY, Ore. -- When Matt Hayes comes home from work, he needs some quiet time.

His wife, Angie, however, needs to talk after spending the whole day taking care of their 1-year-old son.

While that could be a source of conflict, the required marriage training the Milwaukie, Ore., couple received after Matt proposed reminds them to keep their spouse's needs in mind.

"It added to our realistic expectations," Angie Hayes said.

Mandatory premarital training is part of a church-based movement attempting to reduce divorce rates and strengthen marriages.

Statistically, it's tough to tell if it works. The divorce rate has declined 25 percent in Clackamas County since 2000, about the time when roughly 150 clergy signed a commitment to provide mandatory premarital education to all couples married in their churches.

But the divorce rate has dropped even faster in nearby 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, partly because marriage rates are also in decline.

Though it may be hard to statistically prove its benefit, premarital training seems to be gaining strength and acceptance. 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.

Pastors in Multnomah County plan to meet later this month to discuss the wording of a proposed policy.

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.

Tom Dressel, a volunteer who helped develop Clackamas County's policy, said the amount of preparation offered by participating churches varies widely by congregation.

At Oregon City Evangelical, for example, each engaged couple gets assigned to a mentor couple and works with them intensively, going through workbooks and meeting regularly before and after their wedding.

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 reveal areas where a husband and wife might see things differently.

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

Stephen Ledyard, a marriage and family therapist in Bend, Ore., who is not affiliated with a religious organization, said more people are warming to the idea of preparing for marriage.

"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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