

# How To Reverse The Breakdown of Marriage

By Mike McManus, from his e-mail dated Jan 22, 2011

The central domestic issue of our culture is the breakdown of marriage. Few marry and many cohabit. Unwed births are common as is divorce. Every divorce is the destruction of a small civilization. Children of divorce and non-marriage are affected most keenly. Only 45% of American teenagers are living with their married, biological parents. According to Family Research Council scholar Pat Fagan, 55% of teenagers live in homes where their parents have "rejected each other" - either by never marrying or by divorce. No wonder U.S. kids fare poorly in international academic achievement.

Our nation is experiencing four disturbing trends:

1. **The marriage rate has plunged 53% since 1970.** The number of never-married Americans has jumped three-fold from 21 million in 1970 to 63 million in 2008.
2. **Cohabitation has soared 17-fold** from 430,000 couples in 1960 to 7.5 million. That is nearly four times the two million couples who marry in a year.
3. **Unwed births have spiked 8-fold** from 225,000 in 1960 to 1.75 million, most of whom were born to cohabiting parents. These children have the dimmest prospects in life. They are three times as likely to be expelled from school or get pregnant as a teenager than those from intact homes, are six times more apt to live in poverty, and 22 times more likely to be incarcerated.
4. **The divorce rate is triple that of Britain or France.** In the U.S. 23% divorce after five years vs. only 8% in England or France and 10% in Canada. Children of divorce fare as poorly academically and in terms of poverty as those from unwed parents and are 12 times more likely to be jailed as kids from intact parents.

## Marriage Savers Has Answers

How can we reduce divorce and cohabitation and increase marriages to ensure our children a bright future? Exactly 25 years ago, in January, 1986, I persuaded 95 pastors, priests and a rabbi in Modesto, California to sign America's first Community Marriage Policy. By 2001, the city's divorce rate fell by 57% and has remained about half of its former rate for the past decade.

Currently, there are 229 Marriage Covenants that have been signed by more than 10,000 clergy.

What is a Community Marriage Policy? Religious leaders from across denominational lines in a city commit to set rigorous standards for marriage. They pledge to pass the baton to trained Mentor Couples to assist couples considering marriage to improve communication and conflict resolution skills, help the separated to reconcile, to assist those in crisis and in stepfamilies to be successful. In doing so, they create a safety net under every marriage in their congregations. Clergy pledge to equip couples with proven and effective relationship "tools" at five stages of marriage:

1. **Prepare couples for marriage** by training Mentor Couples to teach practical relationship skills and to administer a detailed premarital inventory in which couples respond to 150+ items such as :
  - To end an argument, I tend to give in too quickly.
  - Sometimes I wish my partner were more careful about spending money.
2. **Enrich existing marriages** with such materials as **10 Great Dates**, in which couples come to church for 10 evenings to watch a 15-minute DVD on such topics as "Resolving Honest Conflict" and "Becoming an Encourager." Then couples go on a 90- minute date to discuss the assigned issue. Couples love it and few drop out.
3. **Restore distressed marriages** by training Mentor Couples whose own marriages once nearly failed, to mentor those in current crisis, saving four out of five troubled marriages.
4. **Reconcile the separated**, with a course, **Marriage 911** taken by a spouse interested in saving the marriage when their partner wants out, with a same gender friend, helping him/her grow so much they attract back the errant mate, saving half of such marriages.
5. **Help stepfamilies**, who typically divorce at a 70% rate, be successful in four of five cases by creating **Stepfamily Support Groups** that meet bi-weekly where stepcouples learn from each other how to become successful parents and partners.

## **Results of Community Marriage Policies**

The results of Community Marriage Policies in the first 114 cities signed by 2000, according to an independent study by the **Institute for Research and Evaluation**:

1. **Divorce rates fell by an average of 17.5% in seven years**, with eight cities experiencing a 48% to 70% drop in divorce rates (Austin, Modesto, Salem, OR, Kansas City, KS and its suburbs, El Paso, etc.)
2. **Cohabitation rates fell by one-third in CMP cities** compared to matched cities in each state.
3. **Marriage rates are rising**, such as a 16% jump in Evansville, IN. In 25 years, Modesto's marriages have doubled from 1,300 a year to 2,600 - though that is partly due to population growth.

The Institute estimated that Marriage Savers saved 31,000 to 50,000 marriages from divorce by 2001. With another decade in the original cities, and twice as many cities with trained Mentor Couples, perhaps 100,000 divorces have been averted.

## **How To Organize a Community Marriage Policy**

Typically, a pastor invites a group of clergy to consider taking this step. With new GoToMeeting technology, we can conduct a Marriage Savers Webinar - a briefing with a PowerPoint presentation, at no cost. If area clergy then decide to form a coalition of signing pastors, we coach them. Marriage Savers will speak at a signing of the covenant at 1 pm on a Friday afternoon, so the press will cover it in time for the evening news, alerting the community that "today is a new day for marriage and an old day for divorce." We then train clergy and Marriage Mentors to introduce this proven strategy Friday evening and all day Saturday.

Marriage is not a Catholic issue. It is not a Protestant issue. It is not a Jewish issue. It is a community issue. Successful, well-implemented Community Marriage Policies can change the face of marriage and divorce – couple by couple, congregation by congregation, and community by community.

*Mike McManus is Co-Founder and President of Marriage Savers, a non-profit organization whose goals are to reduce divorce and cohabitation rates, and raise marriage rates. He also writes a weekly syndicated newspaper column, Ethics & Religion, and authored five books on marriage.*