

Mending marriages

Divorce rates continue to slide in Clackamas County

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Wilsonville Spokesman, Dec. 10, 2008

Divorces are slowing in Clackamas County and Tom Dressel couldn't be happier.

As executive director for Every Marriage Matters, Dressel has pointedly worked to get the divorce rate in the county to



slow. That work, which includes partnering with more than 170 churches in Clackamas County, has seen the divorce rate drop by 21 percent since 2001.

"We're kind of excited about it," said Dressel.

The drop in divorce rates hits Dressel poignantly. As a newly married man, Dressel discovered a long road ahead.

"We married in 1965, in love with each other and skiing and sailing," he said. "The third day of our honeymoon, I realized my Liz didn't think like I did."

What followed was 13 years of backsliding "into a swamp of life, battling at mosquitoes and each other," he said.

Both Tom and Liz had their ideas about how marriage and love should be.

Liz had a church background that said divorce wasn't the answer. Tom had an Uncle Harold, who divorced his wife and married his secretary.

"I saw a change," Dressel said. "He didn't love me as he did before. He wasn't the happy uncle I had known. When I was going through our marital difficulties, I understood that the 'grass wasn't any greener on the other side of the fence.'"

The husband and wife both "turned to the Lord for help," said Dressel. "He gave us a new love for each other and a zest to build a strong marriage."

On June 21, 2001, a starting group of 157 Clackamas County churches ratified an agreement

to uphold and value marriage through: requiring premarital counseling, training marriage mentors, providing marriage enrichment opportunities and prayer.

It was similar to what Tom and Liz Dressel did to save their marriage.

"We took every class and retreat that had the word 'marriage' in its title and then started sharing almost immediately with others what we were finding," he said.

They met Dr. Steve Stephens, an area psychologist, and determined together to invite Mike McManus, president of Marriage Savers, to address a group of pastors and businessmen and women. McManus came in 2000. The steering committee and Clackamas County Marriage Policy resulted from that effort.

Dressel said that with about 300 churches countywide, Every Marriage Matters has a program set up in more than half the churches.

"We have Canby churches involved, we have Wilsonville churches involved – every city and town in Clackamas County is represented. Our goal is to build healthy marriages. We strove to reduce the divorce rate by 20 percent in the first five years. We didn't quite reach that, but we made progress."

"Our goal for 2008 is to see the rate drop by 25 percent," said Stephens, president of the Every Marriage Matters Board.

The Rev. Bruce Wenigmann, pastor of Wilsonville United Methodist Church, said the current economic situation will put an even greater stress on marriages.

"I'm absolutely, very much concerned," he said. "It only makes the pressures that much stronger, and makes it easier for divorce to happen. It's definitely something that needs to be addressed."

In the "marriage covenant," pastors agree to require certain steps before they agree to perform a wedding. Those steps include pre-marital counseling, working with the couple and seeing

that they become actively involved in the life of a church.

“We’re helping couples to recognize that marriage is a vocation,” Wenigmann said. “It comes from the Latin word for ‘calling.’ We’re called by God to be together as husband and wife. As they nurture their connection with God in the life of a marriage, that will help them to overcome or to withstand some of the struggles and forces that can lead a marriage to fail.”

Dressel said that Every Marriage Matters supports pastors in Clackamas County by providing information and materials to help bolster marriages.

“Locally, we are networking with pastors by providing them with a monthly electronic newsletter they can use,” said Dressel. “It provides marriage nurturing materials and some events that are happening in the local area they can take part in.”

They also work to meet with local pastors personally to facilitate any help they need. “We felt that someone had to make a stand for keeping marriages healthy and I think we’re seeing good results,” said Dressel. “The key has been getting people to know that there is an alternative to a difficult marriage rather than just get rid of it. You can make it better by developing some skills and working to turn it around.”

Wenigmann said that churches must be actively involved in helping couples who may need counseling if problems start to develop.

“We’re hoping to develop a step that many churches have done,” he said. “They have mentors for couples either going to get married or couples that may be going through some difficulties. We pair people up with folks who have long-time

successful marriages, to walk alongside them, and be a source of support and guidance.

“That’s one thing I’d like to develop this year, and I know Every Marriage Matters, and others, provide that kind of training.”

The Rev. Jim Winters of New Creation Church (formerly Willamette Valley Wesleyan Church) said he has counseled many troubled couples.

“We’ve been able to save several marriages through post-counseling,” he said. “My personal opinion is that it’s about the church developing relationships with people. Do people see the church as relevant and where they should go when there are problems in the family?”

He hopes people will look at “God’s plan for marriage, that he loves them,” said Winters. “The world is falling apart around us, we’ve got to reach out to other people.”

With the goal of reducing divorce in Clackamas County even more, Every Marriage Matters is hoping to expand its training program and partner with some other groups. They want to work in the business community and make themselves available in the educational system as well.

“We’d like to provide training in schools that would focus on relationships,” said Dressel. “There are several programs out there that have no religious content that we could use.

“We’d also like to walk alongside divorce attorneys,” he added. “There are many who don’t like what they see happening. Couples having what amount to minor squabbles and they want the easy way out – divorce.”

Details: www.everymarriagematters.org