

# Helping Marriages

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**H**ow can the church encourage and support marriages in Australia, and especially in our own communities and congregations? While we can issue statements, discuss theology, and put in submissions, there is a need to also consider to also some practical ways to reach out to people in increasing times of challenge and stress and at a time when basic 'marriage knowledge' is at a very low point. I believe more work can be done especially at the pre-marriage time. I list below a few thoughts to begin a conversation and welcome your contribution and comments.

## 1. Community Marriage Policies

Studies in the USA have shown that local churches can influence a region by having the same basis for pre-marriage counselling, and also jointly supporting and encouraging marriage enrichment programmes. Some churches in an area have signed up to a common marriage statement.

## 2. Mentoring programmes in churches

Churches could also consider implementing mentoring relationships, helping younger couples with positive older role models. A very interesting article reflecting on marriage and programmes in the USA considers many aspects related to community marriage policies, mentoring and education. (*'Can This Institution Be Saved?'*, A curious alliance of helping professionals is working to rebuild marriage in a culture of divorce. [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/november/26.52.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/november/26.52.html))

## 3. Increased training for Ministers

In some cases ministers are ill-equipped to undertake pre-marriage education, marriage counselling, or even adequate referral, perhaps sometimes related to their own personal circumstances and issues. I am increasingly bemused by ministers living in circumstances other than their church's doctrinal position on marriage and then actually providing pre-marriage education and officiating at marriages declaring the church's position.

Church resources should be provided to help interested ministers have an opportunity to train and receive education and specialised training.

## 4. Church Schools – pre-marriage education

It is perhaps not widely considered, but denominations educate a large section of the Australian population and while certain courses on relationships and sexuality are taught, church schools could do well to prepare relevant contemporary marriage preparation courses for students that reflect the denomination's understanding of mar-

riage, not only as a foundation for society, but to help young people come to a theological understanding of marriage.

## 5. Increased Funding and Support for Pre-Marriage Courses

Denominations could put more money into sponsoring and encouraging pre-marriage education. Research has shown how helpful pre-marriage courses can be as a foundation for better understanding, or even to prevent a possibly disastrous marriage from happening. Far better for people to understand they should not have married, than to marry for the sake of expectation or because the wedding has been arranged.

## There is a need to consider to also some practical ways to reach out

Prominent researcher Robyn Parker comments: "Examinations of the effectiveness of marriage and relationship education programs are typically relatively complex and small-scale, short-term studies of particular programs that demonstrate some improvements in couples' relation-

ship satisfaction and relational skills.

"Such studies are unable to draw conclusions as to whether these programs can reduce the likelihood of divorce. However, this article reports on a recent analysis of a large-scale survey in which lower odds of divorce were found to be associated with participation in a pre-marriage education program." (Robyn Parker, *'The effectiveness of marriage and relationship education programs'*, Family Matters, AFIS, No. 77)

## 6. Marriage Enrichment Courses

Very few denominations put significant resources into this area, and yet some even bemoan the state of marriages in their own denomination. In the UCA, fewer resources have been put into Growing Together in Marriage, though the South Australian Synod is continuing to promote this ministry which was founded by the UCA in SA in 1981. GTIM is also endorsed by Baptist Churches in SA. [www.gtim.unitingchurch.org.au](http://www.gtim.unitingchurch.org.au)

## 7. Promote Marriage Week

Marriage Week is developing as a wider inter-denominational event with a common agenda to support marriages in a time of increasing challenge. In 2013 this was held 8-14 September. Congregations can join as members and list their events on the website. A variety of ideas and suggestions are provided and resources for services and events: <http://marriageweek.org.au/>

The website also contains a helpful link to over twenty marriage ministries and courses: <http://marriageweek.org.au/marriage/index.php>