

DIOCESE OF TRENTON

**A GUIDE TO FORMING
PARISH MARRIAGE MINISTRY**



Table of Contents

Overview – Why Does the Church Need Strong Marriages?	Page 3
What Is Parish Marriage Ministry?	Page 4
Benefits of Marriage Ministry	Page 5
How the Parish Supports Marriage Through Every Stage of Family Life	Page 5
How Do We Get Started?	Page 6
Presenting Marriage Ministry to the Pastor	Page 6
Selecting a Core Team	Page 7
Visioning and Planning	Page 8
Building Awareness of Parish Marriage Ministry	Page 9
Parish Marriage Ministry Involvement Areas – Opportunities for Evangelization	Page 10
Formation/Training of Marriage Ministry Leadership Team	Page 12
Organizational Setting (Parish Marriage Ministry is Integral to all Pastoral Ministry)	Page 13
Summary	Page 14
Appendix	
○ Article 1 - Mentoring and Like-to-Like Ministry – Excerpts from St. John Paul II and Pope Francis	Page 15
○ Article 2 - A Family Perspective in Church and Society (from USCCB website)	Page 16
○ Article 3 - Excerpts from “Christian Marriage Rooted in the Baptismal Call,” by William P. Roberts	Page 17
○ Article 4 - Specific Elements of the Diocese of Trenton Plan for Strengthening Marriage Supported by Parish Marriage Ministry	Page 18
○ Article 5 - Marriage Enrichment Resources for Parishes	Page 19

Overview – Why Does the Church Need Strong Marriages?

The Church has a Stake in Healthy, Holy Marriages

The Catholic Church has a long and rich history of teaching about the meaning and importance of marriage and family life. Happy and holy marriages are a work of God’s grace combined with our human effort. Marriages are strong and enduring when they rest on three pillars: a transcendent *vision*, a range of *skills* that can lead to virtuous relationships, and a supportive *community*. Through theological, spiritual and pastoral resources, the Catholic faith tradition can help couples and communities put these pillars in place and thereby build strong marriages. (Dr. Richard McCord, executive director of the Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth at the USCCB)

At a moment of history in which the family is the object of numerous forces that seek to destroy it or in some way to deform it, and aware that the well-being of society and her own good are intimately tied to the good of the family, the Church perceives in a more urgent and compelling way her mission of proclaiming to all people the plan of God for marriage and the family, ensuring their full vitality and human and Christian development, and thus contributing to the renewal of society and of the People of God. (Familiaris Consortio)

The family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds. In the case of the family, the weakening of these bonds is particularly serious because the family is the fundamental cell of society, where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to love one another; it is also the place where parents pass along the faith to their children. Marriage now tends to be viewed as a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed in any way or modified at will. But the indispensable contribution of marriage to society transcends the feelings and momentary needs of the couple. As the French bishops have taught, it is not born “of loving sentiment, ephemeral by definition, but from the depth of obligation assumed by the spouses who accept to enter total communion of life.” (Pope Francis, The Joy of the Gospel, *Evangelii Gaudium*)

Marriage is Good for Society

Marriage benefits society by building and strengthening human relationships within the home (among spouses and children) and beyond (involving relatives, neighbors, and communities). For this reason, the family has long been understood as the fundamental unit of society, the foundation from which religious, civic, and legal organizations naturally develop and flourish. The weight of research supports these beliefs about marriage, demonstrating the benefits for the individual and consequently, for the society.

The relational ties and community assets forged through marriage result in many positive outcomes for society. Marriage is a “seedbed” of pro-social behavior that fosters social connections, civic and religious involvement, and charitable giving. Marriage connects men and women to the larger community and encourages personal responsibility, family commitment, community voluntarism, and social altruism.

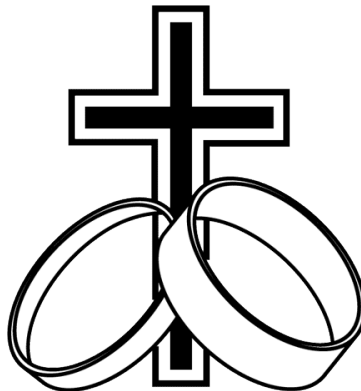
Marriage is the greatest social educator of children. It is the institution that most effectively teaches the civic virtues of honesty, loyalty, trust, self-sacrifice, personal responsibility, and respect for others. The virtues cultivated between men and women in marriage, and between parents and the children, radiate outward into civil society. They deepen in married men and women strong habits of devotion to civic life. (Marriage and the Family in the United States: Resources for Society, USCCB 2012)

What Is Parish Marriage Ministry?

Parish Marriage Ministry is a peer, like-to-like, intergenerational ministry of the laity that serves the full range of spiritual, emotional and social/relational needs of all married couples in the parish through every stage of marriage and family life. Intentional, comprehensive marriage ministry is integrated into the parish structure with connections to all other ministerial and formational functions of parish life, including outreach, service projects, adult faith formation, youth ministry, religious education, pastoral ministry, liturgical ministry and sacramental preparation (See Appendix, Article 1 - "Mentoring and Like-to-Like Ministry- Excerpts from St. Pope John Paul II [Familiaris Consortio] and Pope Francis [Amoris Laetitia]).

Parish Marriage Ministry is founded on the process of evangelization – meeting people where they are and moving them forward in their faith journey, proclaiming the Gospel (bringing the good news of Jesus Christ into every human situation), inviting couples into discipleship and a personal encounter with the living Jesus through their service to others, and providing opportunities for apostleship as couples help to form new disciples in their own family and in the parish community.

Parish Marriage Ministry enables couples to use their experiences of marriage and family life, especially challenges they have overcome, to accompany other married couples in similar situations. Effective marriage ministry helps married couples discern their own unique gifts and talents, and provides opportunities for couples (and divorced or widowed persons) to use their skills in service to the parish community. Members of the Marriage Ministry leadership team oversee all marriage-building initiatives in the parish, including couple retreats, speaker events, marriage-related parish workshops, World Marriage Day activities, anniversary celebrations, bible studies, prayer groups, marriage enrichment and skill-building resources, and social activities.



Benefits of Marriage Ministry

For Clergy	For the Parish	For the Laity
Develop a volunteer driven ministry with no employees needed (empowerment of the laity).	Demonstrate the Church's awareness of the importance of the Sacrament of Marriage.	Have a place to go for marriage formation and enrichment opportunities in the parish and on the diocesan level.
Support marriages with minimal involvement of the pastor and priests.	Show the Church is a true advocate for marriage.	Parents will learn the importance of encouraging vocations within the family.
Increase volunteerism and involvement in other parish activities.	Experience a decrease in the rate of divorce by promoting, strengthening, sustaining and restoring marriages.	Have an opportunity to respond to the call of the laity in Vatican II and more recently from Pope Francis (answering their baptismal call).
Increase in tithing as people develop a better understanding of true stewardship.	Become a true resource for marriage in all stages and situations.	Begin to support others in their commitment to the Sacrament of Marriage (peer ministry).
Increase in the vocations to the priesthood and religious life through the strengthening of families.	Make programs, resources and mentor couples available for couples to seek enrichment, education, and if needed, help for troubled areas.	Be able to seek support and guidance in times of trouble (parish as support system).
Develop well-formed leaders to assist in the life of the parish.	Save on salary and benefits costs through volunteers.	Learn how to model a holy marriage for their children.

How the Parish Supports Marriage Through Every Stage of Family Life

The Stages of Family Life

- Young Adults (18 to 35)
- Newly Married
- Families with Young Children (0-3 years old)
- Families with School Aged Children (6-12 years old)
- Families with Adolescents (13-18 years old)
- Single/Married Adults (no children in the home)
- Golden Years

“An understanding of the lifecycle stages of a marriage is foundational for those wishing to promote and sustain marriage as a community of life and love. If couples know what to expect as normative changes in their relationship, they will be less likely to be blindsided or reactive when these changes occur. Individuals can respond rather than react to life events if they have been helped to understand their feelings and options in the face of change. The faith community that recognizes and anticipates the issues which couples face during the lifecycle can provide proactive resources, mentoring and support at times of transition and high risk.” (“The Lifecycle Stages of a Marriage,” Barbara Markey, ND, Ph.D).

With each new stage in the family lifecycle, married couples must readjust to changes in the family system and must be willing to re-negotiate their relationship to embrace the inevitable changes that will either strengthen their marital bond or threaten to destroy it. Marriage is a dynamic process wherein the couple is either growing together or growing apart.

Through parish marriage ministry, the parish can become the couples’ support system by providing tools to successfully re-negotiate their relationship and determine together an effective course of action that will help the marital relationship to grow.

(For more information on ministering to families, see Appendix – Article 2 – “A Family Perspective in Church and Society.”)

How Do We Get Started?

1. Presenting Parish Marriage Ministry to the Pastor

- **The Need for Parish Marriage Ministry:** Building, sustaining and strengthening marriages adds life and vibrancy to the parish community. Intentional marriage ministry is necessary to accomplish all that’s involved with preparing couples for lifelong marriage, staying connected with them in the early years, equipping parents to teach the faith, encouraging married couples to serve in the parish community, assisting married couples struggling in their marriages, and providing spiritual enrichment to married couples.
- **Domestic and Parish Church:** One of the most important aspects of Parish Marriage Ministry is that it initiates dialogue between the church of the home (also called the domestic church) and the parish church. This dialogue is essential if the parish church is to be aware of the needs of its members and is to offer its resources for the growth of the individual members and families. In like manner, the domestic church will be able to challenge the parish church to keep in touch with the grassroots by offering suggestions, insights, and concrete examples that will make the gospel message come alive in the ordinary events of life. Creative ways to affirm the holiness already present in the domestic church will be made evident in the process.
- **Process, Not Program:** When explaining Parish Marriage Ministry, refer to it as a process. It is not a program that terminates when a particular objective is reached. Rather it is a process of ministry

that becomes an integral part of church life. Identify the various situations that exist in marriages and families that can be addressed by Parish Marriage Ministry.

- **Spirit of Evangelization and Outreach:** Parish Marriage Ministry is a perfect forum for meeting new people in the parish and greeting newcomers with a true spirit of welcome. Inviting married couples to various marriage ministry sponsored events, especially newly married couples or those new to the parish, is a wonderful way to encourage participation in the community. The role of evangelization is necessary for the future of the Church. Parish Marriage Ministry is created as an imaginative and effective form of evangelization.
- **Source of New Members in Ministry:** A pastoral staff cannot adequately meet the needs of all its married couples and families. Adding another “program” to a hectic parish schedule is not the answer. It is important to state that this ministry will not involve more responsibilities for the pastor or leadership. Rather, it will be a source of drawing new people into active ministry within the parish community. Parish Marriage Ministry is a way to help parish members become church for one another. This ministry will empower the laity to reach out to one another in like-to-like ministry.

2. Selecting a Core Team

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit; to another mighty deeds; to another prophecy; to another discernment of spirits; to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes. (1 Corinthians 12:4)

Qualifications of Core Team Members

- Validly married in the Catholic Church and approved by the pastor
- Already disciples
- Interested in strengthening marriage in the Church
- Interested in strengthening their own marriage
- Personal commitment to spiritual growth
- Strong organizational and communication skills
- Ability to motivate, supervise and affirm others
- Experience as a volunteer and familiarity with other church ministries
- Perseverance, enthusiasm, dedication and a sense of humor
- Trust in the Holy Spirit

- Good role model of Catholic marriage for others
- Willingness to undergo on-going formation in marriage ministry; see themselves as lifelong learners

Size of Core Team

The size of the core team will vary depending on the parish. To get the ball rolling and begin the planning process, at two to three highly motivated couples will be needed.

Building the Marriage Ministry Team

Keeping in mind that the *Faith in Our Future* initiative in the Diocese of Trenton is based on the notion of collaborative ministry and sharing of resources among parish communities, it may be helpful to consider recruiting couples from the various parishes in your current cohort to be part of your Marriage Ministry team.

Attract and Empower Volunteers: *What if Jesus didn't empower and send out his disciples?*

- Starts with us: happy, holy, healthy
- Give realistic details to their commitment
- Flexible, adaptable meaningful opportunities
- Everyone you need you are already connected to
- Delegate responsibility for work that matters
- Share authority over decisions that matter
- Listen and act on others ideas
- Encourage others to believe they are important
- Every church member is commissioned through Baptism to be actively involved in evangelization and ministry – it is our vocational call to serve
 - A vocation always arises out of *God's initiative*
 - It draws us into *relationship with the Triune God*
 - The love that accompanies any genuine vocation leads to personal *transformation*
 - And always extends *outward in mission* to others

(See Appendix, Article 3 – Excerpts from “Christian Marriage is Rooted in the Baptismal Call,” William P. Roberts)

3. Visioning and Planning

Once the pastor is on board and has shared his own vision for what marriage ministry will look like in the parish, and the Core Team is actively recruiting to create an entire leadership team, they should begin the visioning and planning process.

Visioning includes determining the purpose and primary goals of marriage ministry in the parish, and may include creating a mission statement that reflects the goals, and that communicates to the parish community what marriage ministry is all about.

The planning process will be on-going, but planning the first season of marriage ministry with two to four primary objectives – actual action items that can be accomplished – is a great way to get started. The diocesan “Plan for Strengthening Marriage,” includes specific recommendations for our parishes, some that can be easily accomplished the first season. (see Appendix, Article 4 – Specific Elements of the *Plan for Strengthening Marriage* Supported by Parish Marriage Ministry.

Responsibilities of the Core Team

- Oversee the operation of Parish Marriage Ministry
- Facilitate initial orientation, ongoing leadership training and overall direction in keeping with adult spiritual formation
- Listen to the needs of married couples and families in the parish community
- Determine objectives and establish priorities to meet these needs
- Sensitize parish staff and leadership to the needs of married couples at different stages of married life
- Work closely with all appropriate areas of parish life
- Offer opportunities for members to develop or create programs, events or initiatives to match and use their experiences, skills and interests
- Delegate responsibilities to other Marriage minister

4. Building Awareness of Parish Marriage Ministry

- Begin talking about Parish Marriage Ministry to everyone you come in contact with. Start up conversations with your priest(s), your parish’s pastoral team, key leadership people, and as many of the people in the parish as possible. Share about some of the basic realities of today’s married couples and their families.
- Listen to the life stories of members of your parish. If you start talking about Parish Marriage Ministry, you will begin to hear and learn about the needs of young adults discerning marriage, of newly married couples and new parents, and of couples in all stages of married life.
- Hold an information evening to launch your Parish Marriage Ministry – To publicize, use parish email list, develop an informational flyer or brochure and post around parish campus in gathering spaces, post in bulletin, announce at Mass and spread the word informally among friends and fellow parishioners. Distribute the promotional flyer to parents through schools and religious education programs.

- Go to Bible classes, women’s groups and existing organizations to talk about Parish Marriage Ministry.

Gather Information:

- What specific programs or events already exist in the parish for adults?
- What are the names of people already involved in any outreach that already exists?
- How many engaged couples are preparing for marriage in the parish and who are they?
- Gather the names of newly married couples in the parish for outreach purposes.
- How can the diocesan Office for Parish Life assist us in forming a Parish Marriage Ministry?
- What kind of adult faith formation is offered in the diocese to help form parish marriage ministers?

5. Parish Marriage Ministry Involvement Areas – Opportunities for Evangelization

The most important task in starting Parish Marriage Ministry is to look at the entire life cycle of marriage and family life through the lens of evangelization, and determine the most immediate needs in the parish. As the following list of marriage ministry involvement areas indicates, getting started in parish marriage ministry can seem overwhelming if we try to “do it all.” It’s best to prioritize, start small with a few key initiatives, and build on small successes. As the size of the marriage ministry leadership team grows, you’ll be able to break your ministry into task areas or committees that can be delegated to the various team couples. For instance, you may start with a “Marriage Enrichment” committee the first season, and plan one or two key marriage enrichment events such as a married couple mini retreat or a World Marriage Day Dinner Dance, or you may wish to offer a marriage enrichment series such as “Beloved.” (See Appendix – Article X – Marriage Enrichment Resources)

Another suggestion for the first session is to build a team of marriage mentors. One of the greatest contributions that faithful married couples can make to the parish is in the form of role modeling and couple witness. Young married couples appreciate the wisdom of seasoned couples who’ve survived the hectic pace of life with children, and now have the time and desire to mentor others. Mentoring can include journeying with engaged couples through the marriage preparation process, assisting newly married couples through marital adjustments, and providing active support and pastoral ministry to couples in difficult situations. This is the heart of peer ministry and a fruitful response to the baptismal call to serve.

- **Marriage Preparation**
 - Sponsor/Mentor couples (Witness to Love)
 - Married couple FOCCUS pre-marital inventory facilitators
 - Prayer partners for engaged couples
 - Special blessing for engaged couples during Mass
 - Pre-Cana team couples

- Young adult mixers – singles events for young adults seeking to meet other YA Catholics
 - Natural Family Planning Instructors and classes
 - Life skills classes: parenting, finances, communication and conflict resolution
 - Preparing civilly married couples for Catholic marriage
- **Marriage Enrichment – Event Planning**
 - Parish prayer group for couples
 - Date nights for couples (Six Great Dates)
 - Monthly gathering of married couples with different activities or speakers (could include movie and discussion, e.g. Fireproof)
 - Couple Bible Study
 - Mini Retreat for Married Couples
 - Eucharistic Adoration
 - Anniversaries announced in Mass
 - World Marriage Day dinner dance
 - Prayer partners for parishioners in need or with special intention
 - *Beloved* series; *Choice Wine* series (12 monthly sessions)
- **Ministering to Other Married Couples (includes like-to-like peer ministry)**
 - Annulment advocates
 - Like-to-Like ministry – couples helping others through same challenges
 - Divorced and remarried couples
 - Couples who've struggled in marriage
 - Couples who've dealt with addictions
 - Couples who've suffered financial struggles
 - Couples who've suffered death of a child
 - Widows/widowers helping others
- **Adult Faith Formation**
 - Work with Parish Director of Faith Formation to provide faith enrichment for married couples in the parish
 - Offer self-study options: Preparatory Catechesis for World Meeting of Families, Catholic Catechism on Marriage, Vatican and USCCB documents
 - Work with diocesan Department of Catechesis and Evangelization or Department of Youth, Marriage and Family Life to offer customized adult faith formation opportunities for married couples
 - Providing a list of upcoming adult faith formation opportunities offered on parish or diocesan level throughout Diocese of Trenton

- Encourage participation in Marriage Ministry Training Series sponsored by Department of Youth, Marriage and Family Life
- **Outreach/Evangelization to newly married couples and young parents**
 - Forming a sub-group for newly married couples and young parents
 - Planning events for young couples
 - Reaching out to parents of children in school or religious education; invite them into life of the parish
 - Offering parenting classes, how to pay for college, how to deal with college debt
- **Resources For Married Couples**
 - Work with web master to develop section of parish website devoted to the needs of married couples and families
 - Provide a kiosk in parish gathering spaces with brochures, pamphlets, cd's, dvd's books on all kinds of marriage and family topics (how to be the domestic church)
 - Regular Marriage-Strengthening Section in Parish Bulletin
- **Social Justice/Service Projects**
 - Organize service projects for married couples to do together
 - Provide opportunities to serve the poor
 - Meals, transportation for families in need

6. Formation/Training of Marriage Ministry Leadership Team

Formation of the Core Team is an on-going process. While the initial qualifications for core team members is that they are Catholics in good standing (in a valid Catholic marriage), approved by the pastor and active members of the parish, the diocese needs to provide on-going formational opportunities to all those who currently serve or who are invited to serve married couples and families on the parish or diocesan level. That includes core team members and well as others involved in marriage ministry activities.

The following topic areas will be covered in various workshops offered throughout the year for parish marriage ministry teams (www.dioceseoftrenton.org/marriageformation)

- Marriage Ministry Core Team Training - "How to Start Marriage Ministry in Your Parish" workshop (offered twice a year in various locations; also offered on the cohort level as needed)
- Marriage Ministry Relational Skills Training (Marital communication, conflict resolution, problem solving, forgiveness and reconciliation, active listening; scripture-based and virtue based life skills)

- Presentation Skills Training for Marriage Ministers (Engaging an Audience, Adult Learning Principles, How to Write and deliver a Witness Talk, Using Power point effectively, small group facilitation)
- Understanding Sacramental Marriage – A Catechesis on Marriage for Marriage Ministers
- Specialized Training (scheduled as needed; parishes may request a training anytime but training must be open to the entire diocese)
 - Pre-Canva Team Training – Using the *Before “I Do”* program effectively in group settings for parish Pre-Canva programs (trained couples may also use *Before “I Do”* in a couple-to-couple setting)
 - FOCCUS/Re-FOCCUS Training for Married Couples (married couples are trained to be the FOCCUS facilitators in a couple-to-couple approach. This approach is used by many dioceses throughout the country).

Organizational Setting (Parish Marriage Ministry is Integral to all Pastoral Ministry)



Parish Marriage Ministry has the potential to influence every major aspect of parish life. It is therefore important that the ministry be linked with the existing organizational structure of the parish. Because Parish Marriage Ministry involves all areas of concern, it's important that the leaders of the ministry be clear about its place in the existing structure and that authority,

responsibility, accountability, communication and budgetary matters are understood and supported by both the leaders of ministry and of the parish.

Summary

Parish Marriage Ministry will look different in every parish because it's designed to meet the specific needs of each parish community. The recommendations in this manual provide the tools and tips needed to launch a Parish Marriage Ministry. The leadership team, in consultation with married couple participants, will decide how often to hold ministry gatherings, what types of programs and events to offer, which parish activities in which to become involved. The Parish Marriage Ministry can begin small, with just a few activities and initiatives, and can grow over time as more couples with different talents, skills and life experiences commit themselves to the ministry. Because it is a process and not a program, the Parish Marriage Ministry will be a dynamic, evolving, living presence in the parish, just like marriage itself.

Appendix

Article 1 - Mentoring and Like-to-Like Ministry – Excerpts from St. John Paul II and Pope Francis

Familliaris Consortio – On the Family

69. The pastoral care of the regularly established family signifies, in practice, the commitment of all the members of the local ecclesial community to helping the couple to discover and live their new vocation and mission.

Young married couples should learn to accept willingly, and make good use of, the discreet, tactful and generous help offered by other couples that already have more experience of married and family life. Thus, within the ecclesial community-the great family made up of Christian families-there will take place a mutual exchange of presence and help among all the families, each one putting at the service of others its own experience of life, as well as the gifts of faith and grace.

Animated by a true apostolic spirit, this assistance from family to family will constitute one of the simplest, most effective and most accessible means for transmitting from one to another those Christian values which are both the starting point and goal of all pastoral care. Thus young families will not limit themselves merely to receiving, but in their turn, having been helped in this way, will become a source of enrichment for other longer established families, through their witness of life and practical contribution.

Amoris Laetitia – The Joy of Love

138. We have to put ourselves in their shoes and try to peer into their hearts, to perceive their deepest concerns and to take them as a point of departure for further dialogue.

223. “the initial years of marriage are a vital and sensitive period during which couples become more aware of the challenges and meaning of married life. Consequently, pastoral accompaniment needs to go beyond the actual celebration of the sacrament (Familiaris Consortio, Part III). In this regard, experienced couples have an important role to play. The parish is a place where such experienced couples can help younger couples, with the eventual cooperation of associations, ecclesial movements and new communities.

230. It could also be helpful to ask older married couples to help younger couples in the neighbourhood by visiting them and offering guidance in the early years of marriage. Given the pace of life today, most couples cannot attend frequent meetings; still, we cannot restrict our pastoral outreach to small and select groups. Nowadays, pastoral care for families has to be fundamentally missionary, going out to where people are.

232. Couples will gain from receiving help in facing crises, meeting challenges and acknowledging them as part of family life. Experienced and trained couples should be open to offering guidance, so the couples will not be unnerved by these crises or tempted to hasty decisions. Each crisis has a lesson to teach us; we need to learn how to listen for it with the ear of the heart.

Article 2 - A Family Perspective in Church and Society (from USCCB website)

What is a family perspective? A family perspective is a guiding vision for planning, implementing, and evaluating programs, ministries, and policies in a parish, school, or any other church institution. It is an example of a systems view of reality. It functions in two related ways. First, it views individuals in the context of their family and other social relationships. Second, it uses family relationships as a criterion to assess the impact of programs, ministries, and policies.

A family perspective is an attempt to put into practice what Pope John Paul II wrote in his 1981 Apostolic Exhortation On the Family (Familiaris Consortio): "No plan for organized pastoral work at any level must ever fail to take into consideration the pastoral area of the family" (n.70). A family perspective is a way of "taking into consideration" the family in a very comprehensive way.

At the foundation of a family perspective are four elements that touch the heart of contemporary family life and, in a sense, define it. Incorporating a family perspective into church life means understanding and utilizing these four elements, in a dynamic balance, when planning, implementing, and evaluating any and all ministries. A family perspective is a foundational way of thinking about church life and ministry. It functions as a broad paradigm.

First Element: A Christian Vision of Family Life

This is the foundation. Because Christians enter into a covenant of love with Jesus Christ, we are called to act with a consciousness of Christ's presence in our family lives. A family striving to place Christ at its center becomes the most basic Christian community: a domestic church. Although it may struggle at times, it will strive to communicate effectively, love deeply, forgive frequently, and share its values with one another. It will also be lifegiving: bringing children into the world and rearing them responsibly; developing the potential of all its members; handing on values and traditions. The Christian family will respond to a call of service in society and church by modeling love, generosity, hospitality, and caring and by reaching out to others in need.

Second Element: The Family as a Developing System

A family perspective assumes that an individual lives, not in isolation, but connected to others by relationships. Familial relationships are among the most important in our lives. Ministry with any individual, insofar as it is designed to facilitate change or conversion, inevitably has an impact on his or her system of relationships. Moreover, that very same relationship system will strongly influence a person's capacity for ministering and being ministered to.

Third Element: Family Diversity

American Catholic families no longer fit into one simple mold. In addition to the normative nuclear family model, there are single-parent families; families of divorce; situations of unemployment, mobility, mixed religion, cultural and racial differences. A family perspective names and celebrates the uniqueness of each family. It seeks to build on each family's strengths and to help each one meet its distinct challenges.

Fourth Element: Partnership between Families and Institutions

Families deal regularly with a variety of public and private institutions, systems, governmental agencies, programs, etc. in an attempt to meet their needs. A family perspective strives to build a working relationship or partnership between families and other entities that participate in family responsibilities. Such entities -- including parishes and schools -- must not only respect the primary responsibility families have for the wellbeing of their members, but also enable families to fulfill that responsibility. Families want and deserve to be treated with respect as trusted partners.

Conclusion

These four elements, taken as a whole, form a lens through which both church and society are urged to view the contemporary family. They also constitute the basis for raising and answering questions about the impact of programs and policies on family life. To bring a family perspective to ministry does not necessarily mean adding new programs, personnel or structures. Rather, it suggests that you examine what exists with a view toward making it more sensitive to the complex reality of family life and, ultimately, toward placing families at the center of the Church's life and mission.

The full scope of a "family perspective," including useful background data about family life and ideas for introducing the idea of a family perspective into your church or organization, can be found in the publication *A Family Perspective in Church and Society* (available in an updated, tenth-anniversary edition from the United States Catholic Conference, Office for Publishing and Promotion Services, 3211 Fourth Street N.E., Washington, D.C.20017. 1-800-235

Article 3 – Excerpts from “Christian Marriage Rooted in the Baptismal Call,” by William P. Roberts

In baptism the person is sacramentally (that is, visibly, explicitly, and ritually) called and empowered: (1) to be incorporated into the life of the Trinity; (2) to participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; (3) to share in Christ’s ongoing mission of proclaiming and advancing the kingdom (reign) of God.

The center of the life of the community of the baptized, the church, is the Eucharist. We are a Eucharistic community. We are called to live Eucharist, indeed, to become Eucharist for one another. There is no more personally and mutually intimate human way in which one can respond to the baptismal call to be Eucharist for another than in a faith-filled, loving, committed marriage. The couple’s shared life with one another speaks out: this is my body given up for you; this is the cup of my life, my blessings poured out for you. Every act of kindness and consideration, every service rendered, every communication of mind and heart communicate this self-gift. They experience in faith Christ’s self-giving through their own self-giving. This in turn empowers and frees them to go beyond the confines of their own personal relationship and reach out eucharistically to their children, their extended family, and to the community.

An authentic and loving marriage provides in a unique way a daily and nightly opportunity to respond to the baptismal call of promoting God’s kingdom, God’s reign, in our lives and in the lives of others. In this intimate partnership of marriage we expose ourselves with all our vulnerabilities to each other. We strive to break down the barriers that can stand in the way of our relating to one another with great honesty, humility, and empathy. In creating deeper communion with one another we are opening ourselves to greater communion with God. In permitting God to reign in our marital relationship and in our family, we are fortifying the institution of marriage and family, the foundations of human society. We are becoming more empowered to go forth beyond the boundary of our family life to challenge the ignorance, injustices, and obstinacies that prevent God from reigning more deeply in our Church, our nation and human society at large.

Article 4 - Specific Elements of the Diocese of Trenton Plan for Strengthening Marriage Supported by Parish Marriage Ministry

Objective 2: To integrate teaching and witness on the vocation of marriage within all formational settings

- (2.D) Seek out married couples to co-teach religious education programs as living witnesses to Sacramental Marriage.
 - As co-teachers in religious education
 - As guest speakers in schools and RE programs during curricular discussions
 - Interact with adolescents
- (2.E) Highlight sacramental marriage within Confirmation programs
- (2.G) Incorporate age-appropriate instruction on Natural Family Planning into Religious Education and Youth Ministry settings.
- (2.H) Integrate teaching about healthy relationships, sex and marriage as part of Youth Ministry efforts.

Objective 4: To improve the effectiveness of marriage preparation so that it is more responsive and relevant to the needs of today's young adults

- (4.F) Incorporate mentoring into the marriage preparation process.

Objective 5: To regularize the situation of civilly married couples so they may enjoy the fullness of the sacramental life of the Church

- (5.D) Use the bulletin to create awareness of convalidation and how to go about it.
- (5.E) Hold information evenings on convalidation.
- (5.F) Make every effort to determine the marital situation of all parishioners upon registration for the parish, or registration for schools or religious education.
- (5.G) Invite couples in irregular situations to discuss the process of convalidation with the Pastor or other member of the pastoral team.

Objective 6: To establish a marriage ministry in every parish to provide intentional support and enrichment for married couples, including those who are struggling in their relationships or family situations

- (6.D) Invite and train a core team of married couples to form a marriage ministry
- (6.E) Implement a locally-determined set of support and marriage enrichment activities (ie. outreach to newly married couples, support for interfaith couples, parenting, enrichment).
- (6.F) Utilize a kiosk to display cd's and pamphlets that offer information on marriage and family life, including resources for difficult situations. Make similar information and resources available on the parish website.

Objective 7: To promote a marriage-building culture in every aspect of parish life

Parishes will choose from among these or other best practices...

- (7.B) Post a weekly message on marriage in bulletin.
- (7.C) Offer Monthly Adoration hour for marriage.
- (7.D) Encourage family participation in sacramental preparation.
- (7.E) Host social gatherings with wholesome activities for adolescents.
- (7.F) Offer public blessing of engaged couples in parishes.
- (7.G) Promote Natural Family Planning instruction to parents, especially at times of transition (i.e. Baptism).
- (7.H) Hold yearly dinner dance in parish for couples celebrating marriage.
- (7.I) Conduct yearly parish mini retreat/marriage enrichment programs, especially for newly married couples.
- (7.J) Ensure that parish staff is trained to provide a positive, informed response to questions about marriage, annulments and convalidation.

Article 5 - Marriage Enrichment Resources for Parishes

- Beloved – offer as a monthly series (6 or 12 sessions)
(<https://www.augustineinstitute.org/formed/beloved/>)
- Offer the “Choice Wine” series for marriage enrichment each month
(<http://thechoicewine.org/>)
- Use the “Happy Together Six Dates for Catholic Couples series (<http://www.happy-together.net/six-dates-for-catholic-couples/>)
- Alpha in the Catholic Context (www.themarriagecoursesusa.org)
- Couple Prayer Series (<http://www.coupleprayer.com/>)
- Come Lord Jesus (<http://www.comelordjesus.com/bringing-come-lord-jesus-into-your-church-parish>)