

Marriage in Crisis

Article 3: The Critical Next Step

Andy Meeko

I could see it in their eyes. The marriage wouldn't last long. And there I was performing the wedding. Certainly I had mixed feelings. Many would argue against doing such a wedding. But I have to admit, these are adults, they have refused counseling, and they will marry regardless. So my prayer is that somehow a Christian influence in their wedding may be a lighthouse in the future storm. A storm that is sure to come.

Now the question becomes, what will we offer couples like this down the road? A survey by Spa! magazine this Fall revealed that of those who divorce, one third do it within the first year, and 80% do it in the first three years. Whatever we offer needs to be offered fast.

FACING UP TO NEGLECT

The reality is that practically nothing is being offered. I have ministered to marriages from Okinawa to Hokkaido. I have counseled hundreds, and taught thousands of couples. That being my experience, I would say a bare minimum of 90% of couples in Japan need at least 8 hours of teaching/therapy for their marriages. 90% of Christians, 90% of non-Christians, and 90% is definitely optimistic.

In the last article we examined the approach of brief therapy, but even brief therapy is generally considered at least 8 sessions. The amount of time I am given in most churches amounts to 2 sessions. But that's okay because the local church has other programs to help marriages right? Wrong. The reality is usually nothing proactive is being done. In the last article I spoke of the need to give struggling couples hope, but in most churches, even if they are given hope, they aren't given the next step—they are abandoned.

This January I will do a three day conference in Roppongi for the US Navy stationed at Atsugi. As mentioned before, US military chaplains are overwhelmed with crisis level marriages. However, this is the first event for Atsugi in two years. Now consider that marriages are like gardens. In the summer they need daily watering, in the winter they need support and protection, in the spring and fall they need planting. And they always seem to need weeding. Two years of neglect in a garden would mean a jungle of a mess,

the same could be said for a marriage.

THE POWER OF SMALL GROUP

So how can we give regular care for marriages? Natural Church Development has done the most intense study of church in the history of the planet, studying 22,000 churches in over 50 countries, and distilling their information to define eight characteristics critical to church health, characteristics such as “empowering leadership” or “gift-oriented ministry” or “inspiring worship.” All eight characteristics are of equal importance. However, in bold print they emphasize, “If we were to identify any one principle as the ‘most important,’ then without a doubt it would be the multiplication of small groups.” Small groups focused on the issues that are “immediate personal concerns.” Are we developing small groups that focus on personal concerns? Is there a bigger concern than marriage?

The Church here seems to have a problem. In the words of George Hunter “many Western church leaders are in denial; they plan and do church as though next year will be 1957,”¹ and perhaps the same could be said about Japan as well. Or perhaps many are only stuck in the year 1977 when English was the rage and even English cooking classes were a great idea. Yes, many Christian leaders fail to see the huge potential impact of thriving Christian marriages.

A decade ago 78% of Fortune 500 companies re-engineered between the years 1991-1993,² and we wonder what percent of churches have re-engineered in the last decade, or even generation. Without a doubt we are stuck in Japan, we hit the plateau years back and are rapidly stagnating while people starve outside our door.

But is it possible that small groups focused on healing homes answer both the crisis today’s homes and the stuck syndrome of the Church? If “small groups are the basic arena for imaging the redeeming presence of God,”³ then take a moment and imagine a city saturated with thousands of small groups that serve as evangelistic teams pressing the gospel into every section of the city: neighborhoods, offices, factories, schools, hospitals, government agencies—everywhere! Well, maybe such groups will not be everywhere, but at a bare minimum, they must become a priority in the local church agenda.

Many will protest: “With such complicated needs of homes we need qualified (graduated, licensed, professional) therapists!” But in this age the postmodern mentality chuckles over such an archaic premise, recognizing that there is something more potent than science. Counselor Larry Crabb also emphasizes that “something good is in the heart of each of God’s children that is more powerful than everything bad. It’s there, waiting to be released, to work its magic. But it rarely happens.”⁴ “It’s time to consider a radical understanding of ‘going to church’ that centers on releasing the power to change lives that God has placed within every member of the Christian community.”⁵ It is an odd irony that while the Church belatedly fusses with scientifically-based therapy, secular society is embracing spiritually-based therapy. We have favored professional counseling, which often amounts to no more than detached intervention, and Nouwen chastises us, “The great illusion of leadership is to think that man can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there.”⁶ In this supra-science arena the most qualified “counselors” are first, Spirit-filled; second, wounded themselves; and then last, empowered. What the church needs most is an army of them— yesterday.

EMBRACING THE NEW MIND

A half-hearted dabbling at meeting the needs of hearts and homes will certainly only backfire, for this is no trite issue, and according to Forester’s Law, “In complicated situations efforts to improve things often tend to make them worse, sometimes much worse, on occasion calamitous.”⁷ To approach these needs amply will require a new mind in ministry, one that is free from the constraints that have kept us bound to the old paradigms and behaviors.

In my travels I have noticed three constraints of the old-church-mind hindering the implementation of small groups for homes. Likely, the most common is the myth that “people in this society will not open up and share on ‘that’ level in groups.” Yet years of experience proves just the opposite. People are thirsty for intimacy, albeit many are crippled in their efforts, and often defeat themselves—but they want it. Because so many people are clumsy at positive conversation, if small group interaction is not structured there is no positive life-change. On the contrary, negative patterns may even deepen. At one church I recall the unguided teatime after a marriage seminar. One after another, the men made blockheaded comments about their wives weight, looks, personalities and cooking and everyone nervously chuckled along. (There is good reason that the first rule in FamilyLife’s HomeBuilders is: Share nothing about your

marriage that will embarrass your mate.)

A second constraint holding us back is the domination of clergy-centered ministry in this country. Pastors and missionaries have neglected the empowerment of believers, and at times we stunt their growth by preserving old-world-order church rules. Likely, this indicates our emaciated view of the Body and the power that crouches in each member. Could it be we pray for Awakening, but God in His grace withholds it because we haven't the means to handle such an influx, at least not with our current structure: a clergo-centric, clergo-dependent one? According to the Gallup Poll, 40% of US church members are interested in "having a ministry."⁸ Imagine conservatively that in Japan it's 20% of believers—or even just a hundred thousand strong, mobilized—the country would never be the same. Rick Warren states that every church will have to decide whether it will be structured for control or structured for growth.⁹ And presently, our dire shortage of leaders is at crisis proportions—what about spawning an environment to breed them?

The last constraint plaguing us is our pigeonholing of hurting people. (The reality is we are all hurting people—and we often forget that hurting people who have integrated their pain, are the best candidates to become vessels of healing.) In recent years, traditional methods of psychotherapy have come under scrutiny. The offense of psychotherapy is its love of labeling—stamping people with the name of a particular pathology. But people don't need labels; they need love. The words of one "untrained" and "highly effective" woman working in a family services program warn, "To me pathology is an attacking position. I think to pathologize is to attack...We don't pathologize, but we don't ignore problems either...Our assumption is there's an enormous amount of pain here and we want to go in and as much as we can alleviate some of it or at least have a healthy respect for it without creating more pain."¹⁰ Are our churches places where some are rewarded for creating the illusion of intactness, while others that struggle are disempowered by being labeled as ill or having a condition? Can we move everyone to a new level of honesty? Can we empower people from being victims, or survivors, to become strategic weapons against the enemy?

What I thirst for most in this milieu strangled by old-world-order are stories—stories that break open the old mind—space in church for the voicing of war-stories (and war-stories are not all stories of victory). I also thirst for the instigation of significant events, where something good is happening in hearts and homes; a deliberate and

consistent incorporation of new stories and new structure. In this day, to change a church you have to change its stories, to change its life you have to structure its positive behaviors.

The storms are coming and yet we still have a chance to author a new future, if we act with Godspeed. Peter Kreeft, in his landmark book on suffering, explains, “Our society is the first one that simply does not give us any answer to the problem of suffering except a thousand means of avoiding it.”¹¹ Now is our chance to give this society ten thousand places to meet it, move beyond it, and really begin to live.

MPR

For more information visit:

www.familylifejapan.org

www.drmeeko.net

¹ George G. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 9.

² Leonard Sweet, *Aqua Church* (Loveland, CO: Group, 1999), 13.

³ G. W. Icenogle, *Biblical foundations for small group ministry* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994),

⁴ Larry Crabb, *Connecting* (Nashville, TN: Word, 1997), xi.

⁵ Ibid. xiv.

⁶ Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Image Books, 1990), 72.

⁷ Rubem Alves, *Tomorrows Child: Imagination, Creativity, and the Rebirth of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 62.

⁸ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 366.

⁹ Ibid. 378.

¹⁰ William C. Madsen, *Collaborative Therapy With Multi-Stressed Families* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 19-20.

¹¹ Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1986), 12.