

disciplining marriages



Filling the Gap
Between
Premarital and Crisis Counseling



Brad Rhoads
with **Brittany Cragg**

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Emphasis to Scripture has been added.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Chapter 1	11
<i>Why Marriage Matters</i>	
Chapter 2	19
<i>The Ministry Gap: It's Time to Stop Ignoring Marriages</i>	
Chapter 3	23
<i>Filling the Ministry Gap: It's Time to Invest in Marriages</i>	
Chapter 4	29
<i>First Things First: Overarching Principles for Effective Ministry</i>	
Chapter 5	35
<i>Who? (Top Down & Bottom Up)</i>	
Chapter 6	43
<i>What? (The Content)</i>	
Chapter 7	49
<i>When? (The Models)</i>	
Chapter 8	55
<i>Where? (Determining the Best Setting)</i>	
Chapter 9	61
<i>How? (Effective Promotion; Successful Launch)</i>	
Conclusion	67

Introduction

Jeff was woken by a tugging on his arm. His daughter's whisper: "*Where's Mom?*"

"In the other room," he mumbled, still half asleep.

It was hard to put a finger on why or when it had become the norm, but Jeff and his wife Amy had taken to sleeping in separate rooms some time ago. No hard feelings. It was just easier this way.

"No, she's not," his daughter insisted. "And she's not downstairs, either."

Something in her voice shook him awake, and he swung his legs over the side of the bed. He looked at his phone: 3:05 a.m. He sent Amy a text: "Where are you?"

He checked her location. Location services were turned off.

Walking past the master bedroom door, he peeked inside. Empty.

They headed downstairs, and as he flipped on a light in the kitchen, Jeff heard the crunch of tires on gravel. Peering out the front windows, he and his daughter saw a car with its headlights turned off stopping at the base of their driveway.

The passenger-side door opened, and someone got out and began walking quickly and quietly toward the front door, using a phone flashlight to see through the dark.

As the light from the house illuminated a face, they recognized familiar features.

It was Amy.

When Amy pushed open the door and paused, staring back at them, Jeff *knew*. He knew with a sickening wrench of his stomach where she had been, what she was about to say.

Amy didn't intend to have an affair, of course. Very few people wake up one morning and decide to be unfaithful to their spouse. Getting to that point always happens by degrees.

For Jeff and Amy, the drift apart had begun years before. They had been crazy about each other when they were dating and first married. Jeff loved the way Amy brought him out of his shell unlike anyone else, and Amy loved Jeff's reliability and steady, calming nature.

But after 17 years, their marriage had become a stale coexistence. Romance and any sort of pursuit of each other took a backseat to the demands of their busy life. Both of them worked hard to juggle the plates of work, housework, and church commitments, and to get their three girls—one in elementary, two in middle school—to all their activities.

Jeff had known their marriage wasn't great, but he wasn't that worried about it. They were fine ... *and wasn't that how everyone else felt?* We're okay but not great? Since they were both professing Christians, he didn't think either of them would ever even consider divorce.

But Amy had become extremely lonely. Offered attention by another man, she played around with it. It felt nice to be seen and heard. It felt nice for someone to notice all the good

things about her instead of taking them for granted. It felt nice to be wanted.

After several months of internally justifying her increasing attachment to this other man, Amy made a terrible decision.¹

And the saddest part of Jeff and Amy's story may be this—their story is not unique. You probably know many Jeff and Amys, couples whose marriages are plodding along, doing “just fine” but far from thriving. Some of these marriages settle into a dull, utilitarian partnership. Others blow up in crisis and end prematurely in divorce.

Why is this so common? Why is marriage known more for boredom and restriction than it is for joy and fun?

We wrote this book because we believe the answer to that question is *because the way we do marriage is broken*. Couples just coast along until crisis hits. They then spend a lot of time and money trying to fix it. As one care pastor lamented, “every case is different, and every case is the same. Couples simply drift apart and find themselves in a terrible place.”

Frankly, the drift into stagnancy hit my marriage with Marilyn as well. We followed a typical path. Enjoy dating. Get married. Watch the complexities of life increase. Gradually spend less and less time together and fall into complacency. Our church didn't have a marriage ministry. We didn't know how to be married well. What chance did we have?

Fortunately, we had two mentors who completely changed how we did marriage. They disciplined our relationship. They taught us to pursue one another as we pursued Christ; they taught us how to extend grace and love each other intentionally.

¹ Jeff and Amy are not the real names of the individuals involved. The story depicted is not the actual story of any one couple, but the depiction of an all-too-common occurrence in couples around the world.

They changed our lives and likely saved our marriage.

We began to enjoy each other so much that one day I got a call from a young man in our church who had just gotten engaged. He asked us if we would do their premarital counseling. I said, “Sure, but why are you asking us and not a pastor?” He said, “We want what you have. We like your marriage. It looks fun. Teach us how to do marriage.” And so we did. This couple got off to a great start and sent another couple our way. Then another. Soon we started a group to try to reach more couples. God had granted us favor with these marriages; we had a two-year waiting list to be in our marriage discipleship group. We quickly realized the viral attraction of vibrant marriages.

Eventually, I was ordained as an elder and the marriage pastor at our church. But this is when the extent of the problem became apparent. There was a huge and devastating ministry gap in the church. Our church (like many others) offered premarital counseling and crisis counseling. That was the “marriage ministry”. The only thing we were missing in our marriage ministry was the marriage itself. We had no strategy for helping or discipling actual, “normal” marriages. We only had the equivalent of a nursery and then life-support. What about all the life, all the marriage, in between? I saw the tremendous opportunity the church had to prevent crisis, change marriage and bring families alive all over the world.

This revelation rocked my world. Though I was currently working full-time as a civil litigation attorney and had built a successful practice with my dad, uncle and brother, I felt like my heart was on fire for marriages. I felt called by God to leave the practice of law completely to seek to fill this ministry gap and help churches disciple marriages. It was not okay with me that so many marriages were like sheep without a shepherd—

no one teaching them to grow, helping protect them, helping enrich them.

Marilyn and I founded Grace Marriage in 2015 to accomplish two primary goals: 1. Spread the life-changing message of grace and intentionality to marriages worldwide, and 2. Provide churches with everything they need to disciple marriages and have a robust, ongoing marriage ministry.

As a nation and especially as the Church, we are way overdue to replace a crisis-response, reactive approach to marriage with a proactive, preventative approach. It's time to "shift the drift" and ditch complacency for a continual pursuit of growth. For couples, this looks like ongoing investment in their marriages. For church leaders, this looks like ongoing discipleship of the marriages under one's care—from newlyweds to the Jeff and Amys.

Speaking of which ... their story wasn't over at 3 a.m. on that fateful morning.

Jeff and Amy had a tough choice. They could divorce and go separate ways. Jeff thought of his girls splitting time between two homes. He worried about visitation schedules and the likelihood of a strange new man helping raise them. He wondered how he and Amy would make it work financially—two house payments, child support payments, attorneys' fees, two sets of bills, and the same income.

Or they could try to reconcile. Jeff wasn't sure if he could truly forgive, trust, or even interact normally with her in the future. Amy also questioned whether Jeff could really forgive her, or whether he would always hold this against her. For both, reconciliation seemed impossible, but divorce was terrifying.

They spoke to a counselor who encouraged them that, if repentance and grace were primary, their marriage could make

it and even thrive. So Jeff and Amy decided to give it a try and fight for their family.

In God's kindness, their church had a crisis marriage process as well as an ongoing marriage discipleship pathway. They went through crisis counseling and then, when they reached a point of stability and had established good communication patterns, joined the church's ongoing marriage ministry. They were given the tools to invest in each other intentionally, to build something new from the ashes of their brokenness. Now, less than a year after darkness threatened to tear them apart, Jeff and Amy both say their marriage is stronger, more joyful, and more connected than ever before.

They also agree that the affair wasn't what brought them to the point of crisis. It was the years of stagnancy that preceded it.

And again, that's why we wrote this book.

We believe that with grace and intentionality, marriages can be transformed. They can move from just surviving to thriving, from drifting apart to drawing closer than ever. And when we help couples invest in each other and pursue one another like never before, we don't just change their lives—we create a ripple effect that impacts their families, their communities, and even future generations.

We believe in marriage *discipleship*. Effective marriage ministry isn't just about avoiding a crisis; it's about building something extraordinary. It's about fostering marriages that radiate joy, grace, and unconditional love—a love that draws people to Jesus because they see His reflection in how we treat each other.

How do we do that? Turn the page and let's get started.

Why Marriage Matters

Imagine the moment when, after viewing and naming all of creation, Adam realized he was utterly alone. There was not a single creature in the land, sea, or sky that was like him. Not in all the ways that mattered, at least. Imagine the void that needed to be filled—an absence so dire that after calling all of creation “good,” God saw it and called it NOT good. It was *not good* for man to be alone.

So God stepped into the void. He created a woman and brought her to the man.

Imagine the joy, relief, and unbridled delight that would cause Adam to cry, “*this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of*

my flesh!” as he beheld his bride.² Here was a helper fit for him. Here was an equal partner to share the mantle and the mandate to fill the earth and rule over it.

And they were naked and unashamed. In the purity and intensity of their intimacy, there was nothing to fear and nothing to hide. There’s never been another relationship in the world like that first marriage. And that is what marriage is meant to be—two people, side by side, facing life together, intimately connected, and unashamed. It’s a relationship that reflects God’s own love for us, a love that is unconditional, faithful, and unrelenting.

To borrow the apostle Paul’s words, what a profound mystery! That bodies and souls could intertwine such that they are no longer two people but one flesh. And more profound still is this—that God chose this unique relationship to say to His Church, “That’s how I love you. That’s how you’re to love Me.”³

Perhaps this is why you are reading this book and care about marriage ministry in the first place. You want to help this precious, profound relationship grow and thrive. But perhaps you see the epidemic of stagnancy and divorce and wonder if we can really make a difference. You might ask: *Has the train left the station? Is there no going back? Is marriage already a thing of the past?*

We want to encourage you, wherever you are in terms of process or experience. If you are seeking to aid and strengthen marriages, you are doing significant, worthwhile, Kingdom work. “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9).

² See Genesis 2:23

³ See Ephesians 5.

Press on, faithful brother or sister, because what you are doing *matters*. It's worth every bit of effort, every sleepless night, every tear shed in prayer for a struggling couple. You are in the fight to restore and protect something beautiful, something that God himself treasures.

MARRIAGE MATTERS TO GOD

We know God cares deeply about marriage because, as stated above, it's the picture God chose to describe His relationship with His Church. Jesus also referred to himself as a bridegroom multiple times.⁴ Marriage is literally all throughout God's Word—from Eden to love poetry in Song of Songs, to the inspired guidance for husbands and wives in the epistles. One author describes the Bible as one big love story from beginning to end:

It's the story of God choosing, gathering, and beautifying a bride for his Son. ... We see she often has a hard heart; she's often resistant to his affections and wholly dismissive of his gifts. Yet the Father is relentless in his pursuit and preparation of this bride for his Son.⁵

And when the day of the Lord has come, and His Bride has made herself ready, Revelation 19 says all the saints will join the wedding supper of the Lamb. God's love for His Bride is not just a picture of how husbands and wives should love each other while here on Earth; it is our ultimate, eternal reality.

Marriage also matters to God because it is a stunning

4 See John 3:29, Matthew 25:1-13, and Mark 2:19.

5 Nancy Guthrie, *Even Better Than Eden* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 77.

reflection of the gospel, and in this way is unlike any other human relationship. It is a living word picture of the unconditional love and sacrificial commitment of Christ to the Church. When a husband and wife consistently show grace to one another when sinned against, pursue one another when busyness or distance encroaches, and enjoy one another in sweet fellowship, they mirror the beauty of Jesus' love for us.

This is, of course, sanctifying for the couple themselves. As they daily choose to set their flesh aside and choose grace, kindness, and selflessness, the Lord is using their marriage to shape each of them into His image. And as they are personally enriched and matured through the instrument of their marriage, their relationship grows in closeness and enjoyment. There is a wonderful, God-glorifying synergy there—marriages that look like God's love create joyful spouses, who gladly continue to extend God's grace to each other.

Healthy marriages also display God's redeeming grace in a powerful way to the unbelieving world. When marriages demonstrate covenantal love, they *show* the world (in a way that words cannot say) the life-changing power and reality of God's love for us. Think about that for a moment. Through cultivating healthy, Christ-centered marriages, we can demonstrate to the lost the profound impact of God's redeeming grace on our relationships. We must honor and prioritize marriage because of this. As we said before, if you are ministering to and encouraging marriages, this is important work you are doing!

MARRIAGE MATTERS FOR THE INTEGRITY OF A CULTURE

Marriage is also incredibly important to maintaining a stable

culture, within and outside of the home. Several studies confirm that children thrive best in a married, two-parent, low-conflict household.⁶ (And we wish to emphasize the “low conflict” part of the prior sentence. Clearly, there are instances where divorce or separation is necessary and most beneficial to the health or safety of some or all persons.) For a culture that increasingly sees marriage as unnecessary or archaic, though, we and the statistics beg to differ. Indeed, as one report states, “Study after study shows a strong correlation between marriage and a wide array of positive outcomes, and also shows that the benefits of marriage are larger than would be predicted by economic factors alone.”⁷

Further, marriage and a strong sexual ethic are linchpins to the success of a civilization at large. Oxford social anthropologist J.D. Unwin, in his extensive research on 86 cultures, found that the loss of a sexual ethic—embracing total sexual freedom—always precluded the collapse of a culture

6 A report by the AEI-Brookings Working Group on Childhood in the United States titled, “Children First: Why Family Structure and Stability Matter for Children,” looked at the effect of marriage on the children in the home, and summarizes several of these studies nicely:

There are many reasons why children raised by married parents are more likely to flourish.... [They] have access to higher levels of income and assets, more involvement by fathers, better physical and mental health among both parents, more family stability, and many other factors. ...[E]ven given equal levels of parental attention, income, family stability, and other factors, children in married-parent families tend to end up better off than those living in other types of family arrangements. The advantages of being raised in a married-parent family appear to be more than the sum of the inputs.

7 AEI-Brookings Working Group on Childhood in the United States, “Children First: Why Family Structure and Stability Matter for Children,” published February 28, 2022, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/children-first-why-family-structure-and-stability-matter-for-children>.

within three generations.⁸ By contrast, cultures that required or lauded premarital chastity and then absolute monogamy within marriage surpassed all other cultures in every area, whether literature, architecture, agriculture, engineering, or the arts.⁹

So history and research tell us that when marriages flourish, entire cultures thrive. Strong marriages create strong families, and strong families are the heart of vibrant communities and nations.

MARRIAGE MATTERS FOR THE INFLUENCE OF THE CHURCH

The health of the Church is deeply connected to the health of its marriages. When marriages in the Church are strong, the Church itself is strong, ready to reach out in love and purpose. But when marriages are struggling, the energy and focus of the Church often shift to crisis management.

The health of the Church is deeply connected to the health of its marriages.

Healthy marriages are also a powerful witness to the world of God's love. They tell a story without words—a story of commitment, forgiveness, and grace that the world longs to see and experience. When

people see joyful, grace-filled marriages, they are drawn to the source of that love. They are drawn to Christ.

⁸ Durston, Kirk. "J.D. Unwin and Why Sexual Morality May Be Far More Important than You Ever Thought." Quest, 7 June 2023, www.kirkdurston.com/blog/unwin. Much credit to Kirk Durston for his neat summarization of Unwin's 600+-page study, "Sex and Culture."

⁹ Id.

Finally, healthy marriages tend to have a multi-generational impact. Every home is a model of sorts for the children who grow up in it. Complacent marriages often bring about complacent marriages. Broken marriages tend to bring about broken marriages. And healthy, strong marriages often bring about healthy, strong marriages. When couples love each other with intentionality and consistent investment, they set an example for their kids: mom and dad prioritize their marriage. It makes a strong statement when the kids know mom and dad are on another one of their regular “date nights” again. It gives the kids the impression that that’s just what married couples do.

Every marriage leaves a legacy. Imagine what could happen if more kids saw their parents in thriving, life-giving marriages—marriages marked by grace, laughter, and unwavering commitment. Imagine the impact on families, churches, and even our nation if more marriages began to grow in love and intentionality, sowing seeds of connection and reaping a harvest of joy.

What if our marriages could change the way future generations even *think about* marriage? What if they could see that a lifelong commitment is not a burden but a beautiful journey of grace and growth? The truth is, investing in marriage is not just about helping couples; it’s about something much bigger than the people in front of you. When we pour into marriages, we build up families, we enable the Church to fulfill its mission, we draw the lost to Jesus, and we extend a legacy of love and grace to future generations.

The Ministry Gap: It's Time to Stop Ignoring Marriages

The present reality is not so pretty, though. Secular culture is increasingly rejecting the idea that marriage is a good thing.

In a 2020 Gallup poll, only 64% of respondents said they believed getting married was very important or somewhat important—down from 73% only 14 years earlier in 2006.¹⁰ Perhaps more concerning, a 2023 Pew Research Center study

¹⁰ Gallup, “Marriage,” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/117328/marriage.aspx>, accessed August 8, 2024.

found that young people believe job satisfaction and having close friends is more fulfilling than getting married or having children ... and by a whopping 40 percentage points.¹¹ Only 20% of adults ages 18-34 said getting married was extremely or very important to leading a fulfilling life.¹² Marriage is increasingly seen as archaic, unnecessary, and perhaps even too much of a liability.

With headlines like that, it's no wonder that more and more people are choosing not to get married. Many singles look at the statistics on divorce and think, "Why risk it?" Why get married if it's likely to end in heartbreak or monotony?

But the real question is—where is the Church in all of this?

If you want to know what a church truly values, don't just read its mission statement—look at how it allocates its time, money, and resources. And here's the hard truth: most churches are missing the mark. According to a Barna survey, 72% of churches have no substantive marriage ministry, and an even higher percentage of churches have absolutely zero dollars allocated to discipling marriages.¹³ Sure, they might offer premarital counseling or a lifeline when a marriage is in crisis, but where's the ongoing support for the average marriage that could use a boost?

This is a tremendous gap that needs to be filled. We have a generation of marriages that aren't necessarily in crisis but aren't thriving either. They need discipleship, encouragement, and intentional investment long before they hit rock bottom.

11 Kim Parker and Rachel Minkin, "What makes for a fulfilling life?," Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/09/14/what-makes-for-a-fulfilling-life/>.

12 Id.

13 Communio/Barna study. See *Endgame* by J.P. DeGance and Dr. John Van Epp.

Hebrews 13:4 tells us to “Let marriage be held in honor among all,” yet how can we say we honor marriage when we’re not actively investing in its growth within our churches? We’ve talked to pastors who admit their church’s landscaping budget is bigger than their marriage ministry budget. It’s not that they don’t care about marriages; it’s that the vision for what a thriving marriage ministry could look like hasn’t fully taken root. But what if it did? What if churches across the nation started treating marriage like the critical area of discipleship that it is?

Imagine the impact if churches prioritized marriages the way they do children’s or youth ministries. For decades, churches have poured billions of dollars into children and youth ministries.¹⁴ Yet a healthy marriage is the upstream source that influences everything else in a family’s life, including the worldview of the kids and teenagers growing up in that household. If there’s dysfunction at home, no amount of youth programming can fully heal those wounds. We can’t keep fighting downstream issues while ignoring the source—we need to go upstream and strengthen the marriages.

You can visualize family ministry as a three-legged stool with children’s ministry, youth ministry, and marriage ministry each comprising a leg. If one leg is absent, the ministry loses effectiveness.



And here’s the real kicker: lackluster marriages in the Church are a major hindrance

¹⁴ Endgame, Dr. John Van Epp and J.P. DeGance, p.28.

to our witness. We're telling the world about the transformative power of the gospel, yet when they look at our marriages, they often see complacency, stagnation, and even brokenness. If we believe that God's grace can radically change lives, then surely it should transform our most important human relationship—our marriage.

But here's the good news: we can change this. Just like how youth and children's ministries became a standard part of church life, we can create a new normal for marriage ministry. It starts with a commitment to discipleship that includes intentionally investing in the health and growth of marriages.

This is the moment to step up, to look at marriages in our churches and communities with fresh eyes and a renewed passion. Let's stop ignoring the ministry gap and start building a culture that values, nurtures, and fights for marriages. Let's not just react to crises; let's proactively build marriages that reflect the grace and power of God's love.

Filling the Ministry Gap: It's Time to Invest in Marriages

We've already unpacked some hard truths about the state of marriage in our culture and our churches. It's clear that for many, marriage is not living up to its God-designed potential. But here's the thing: there's incredible hope. Churches have the power to transform marriages and reshape what marriage looks like in the world around us!

MARRIAGE MINISTRY = MARRIAGE DISCIPLESHIP

We need to reconceptualize marriage ministry if we're going to revolutionize marriages. Marriage shouldn't be stagnant, lifeless, or unattractive. It should be full of joy, grace,

connection, and growth. And marriage ministry should be so much more than premarital coaching or crisis counseling. It should be marriage *discipleship*. It should be an intentional, ongoing pathway of mentorship and encouragement for all marriages, whether they're just beginning or have decades of history.

Consider how the typical approach to marriage ministry currently plays out:

- Get a young, bright-eyed couple ready for marriage through 4-8 sessions with a pastor or lay leader.
- Pat them on the back and say, “good luck!”
- If they ever get to a point where they hate each other, then pour a ton of staff time and resources into trying to help them salvage the marriage.



For most churches, the first engagement with an actual marriage is at the point of crisis. This approach is backwards! Why are we waiting until marriages are on the brink of collapse before we step in? The average couple is unhappy in their marriage *six years* before seeking help.¹⁵ This gives them six years to create damage before the church comes alongside. Aside from the fact this is poor stewardship of the marriages within a church's reach, it's also bafflingly inefficient from the perspective of using church

15 Terry Gaspard, "Timing Is Everything When It Comes To Marriage Counseling," The Gottman Institute, <https://www.gottman.com/blog/timing-is-everything-when-it-comes-to-marriage-counseling/>.

resources wisely. As the saying goes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure—and this is true for marital health, too. Prevention is so much more fruitful (and a lot less expensive!) than crisis intervention.

MARRIAGE DISCIPLESHIP PRODUCES GREAT MARRIAGES

When you invest in a couple who are stable, they see quick growth. When you invest in a couple who are in crisis, you may spend hours with them and see little to no progress. It is simply easier to take a marriage from a 5 to a 9 than to take one from a 1 to a 4. Pastors have relayed to me that it is as if couples come into my office, dump a bag of shattered glass on my desk, and ask me to put it back together for them like a thousand-piece puzzle. Crisis counseling and, for many, by the time they started counseling, it is too late. Of course, the Church still needs to serve those in crisis, but part of the Church loving its people well needs to be helping them avoid the pain of marital catastrophe in the first place. The existing crisis-response model of marriage ministry needs to change.

SCALE OF ENGAGEMENT



An intentional, proactive marriage ministry approach is totally different. Marriage discipleship helps couples build their marriage on the grace of Jesus and intentionally grow their relationship. The goal is more than survival—it's moving

more and more couples away from crisis and to a thriving point of regular enjoyment. Through an ongoing ministry approach, the Church can help couples apply the gospel to their marriage, resulting in a church full of couples who show grace to one another despite daily “hiccups,” pursue one another faithfully, and continue to grow in intimacy, connection, and delight.

GREAT MARRIAGES CAN CHANGE GENERATIONS

Imagine the impact these life-giving marriages may have on the youth and children of a church! Future generations see that those who sow sparingly may reap sparingly, but

***A church that invests
in marriages is
investing in its future***

that those who sow bountifully also reap bountifully.¹⁶ They grow up experiencing and expecting marriage to be a union marked by grace, fun, and growth together.

They grow up feeling secure in their parents’ love for one another, and eager to be married themselves. Their idea of marriage isn’t the negative ball-and-chain that dominates perspectives today; they see marriage as a gift, a journey of growing together in love and faith. A church that invests in marriages is investing in its future, shaping young hearts to value the covenant of marriage the way God intended.

We believe this is the Church’s role in saving the future of marriage. Christians must lead by example if we expect the world to stop treating marriage as dispensable. We must put our money (and time) where our mouth is; we need to give marriage the honor it is due.

¹⁶ See 2 Corinthians 9:6.

GREAT MARRIAGES PREACH THE GOSPEL

The benefits of an intentional, ongoing marriage ministry don't stop with a church's people, either. Vibrant marriages tend to attract attention. If Christian marriages are the most grace-filled, connected, joyous marriages around, the watching world *will* take notice, and they *will* want what we have. Love that extends grace and pursues faithfully despite flaws is supernatural. It mirrors the extravagant love of God for us. Christians have a tremendous opportunity to preach the gospel without words through the way we do marriage.

Believers are called to be set apart; we are called to be the salt and light of the world.¹⁷ When our marriages stand strong, they act as a moral preservative in a culture that's losing its grip on the value of commitment and covenant love. They shine as beacons of hope and grace, pointing people toward the transformative power of Christ's love.

The only catch here is this: If the Church wants marriages to thrive, it's got to invest in them. Just like keeping children, puppies, or plants alive, the marriages of any given church need care and attention to continue growing. Discipleship is only truly effective when it is ongoing. People never reach a point where they "arrive" in their sanctification. Marriages never "arrive," either, so providing an ongoing pathway of marriage discipleship will require intentionality on the part of the church.

YOUR CHURCH CAN FILL THE MINISTRY GAP

And now we've come to what is really the crux of this book—your church can do this. Your church can be the

¹⁷ See Matthew 5:13-16.

catalyst that changes marriages in your community. Your church has the potential to revolutionize how couples experience and understand marriage by creating an ongoing pathway of marriage discipleship and enrichment. This isn't just about fixing problems; it's about setting marriages up to flourish from the start.

***Your church can
be the catalyst
that changes
marriages in your
community.***

If that feels overwhelming, be encouraged! Various ministries have been helping churches do this for years and are willing and able to help you make this vision a reality. Our ministry, Grace Marriage, has developed a framework to help churches build flourishing, growth-focused marriage ministries without overwhelming the staff or burning out volunteers. With seven years of curriculum designed for both large and small groups, we have the tools and experience to partner with your church in this journey. We consider it a privilege to share our model with you in the next part of this book, and to partner with you in bringing life to marriages within your church.

Our way isn't the only way to do this, and our aim here isn't to toot our own horn. We simply aim to be as helpful as possible in helping as many churches as possible make marriage ministry a pillar of their discipleship strategy. We've laid out below the "*who, what, when, where, and how*" of our blueprint for building a proactive, ongoing marriage ministry. And we'd love to know how else we can help you.

Because when marriages thrive, churches thrive. And when churches thrive, the gospel spreads, souls are saved, and communities are transformed. Together, we can start something that changes the way the world sees marriage—one couple, one family, one church at a time.

First Things First:

Overarching Principles for Effective Ministry

As you decide which model works best for your church and make other decisions regarding communication or content, be encouraged—this is important Kingdom work you are doing. You are building an ongoing marriage ministry, a pathway for couples to be discipled together. Your ministry will exalt the living God, rejuvenate marriages, and even draw the lost if you keep Jesus Christ at its center.

The marriage ministry cannot be an isolated ministry, separate from the mission of the church. It must be a core part of the church's discipleship and evangelism. As such, the ministry will do well to abide by three overarching principles

that will ensure the ministry achieves its aim of glorifying God and teaching couples to do marriage in a way that draws people to Him. The first one is this: the thing that will make your marriage ministry a powerful means of changing lives is the very power of the gospel—it's the grace of God.

PRINCIPLE #1 – KEEP THE GRACE OF JESUS AT THE CENTER

The Problem: A House Built on Shifting Sand

Without Jesus as the center, marriage can feel like an endless cycle of performance—an exhausting give-and-take, where love is given or withheld based on merit. Couples start to measure their worth and dole out affection through a lens of performance, and soon their relationship feels unstable, like shifting sand. When problems arise, the foundation starts to crack.

But what if their marriage could be different? What if the key to a thriving marriage wasn't in their efforts alone?

The Solution: Grace as the Rock-Solid Foundation

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.” (Psalm 127:1)

Here's the truth: When Jesus—and what His sinless life, death on our behalf, and resurrection means for us—is at the center of marriage, everything changes. With a foundation built on the grace of God, love becomes a free gift, unearned and overflowing. The burdens of performance are lifted. When one spouse struggles, grace reigns. The marriage remains stable and unshaken.

At Grace Marriage, we have seen lives transformed by this

simple truth: grace changes hearts. Over and over, couples share stories of how grace-based marriage restored hope, healed brokenness, and renewed love. One husband shared, *“We were performance-based, always measuring how we treated each other. Now, we offer love freely as a gift of grace. It’s changed every single part of our relationship.”*

It seems a lot of marriage counseling addresses the symptoms but not the disease. A behavior modification approach will always fail at some point, because its hope lies in the steadfastness of two individuals who still sin.

It tends to go something like this:

- A counselor sees and hears what the couple is doing wrong and explains it to them.
- The counselees agree on where their conduct falls short of the biblical standard.
- They are given practical advice on how to act better toward one another.
- Then they do indeed do better—for about 4-6 weeks—before reverting to their previous norm (or worse).

These couples need to understand grace. Their marriage needs grace. They need to be encouraged more than torn down. Heart change must always precede behavior change.

A marriage pastor and good friend shared with me that a good question to ask couples in your marriage ministry or in counseling at your church is, “How is the gospel at work in your relationship?”¹⁸ When the couple inevitably asks, “What

¹⁸ Idea borrowed with permission from Nathan Thompson, Southeast Christian Church, Louisville, KY.

do you mean by that?” you have an opportunity to lay out the gospel for them (you’d be surprised how many people in your church don’t fully understand this), and to tell them of the hope their marriage has because of what Christ has already accomplished for them.

This is the kind of marriage ministry you can build. One rooted not in behavior modification but in the transformational power of the gospel. Your church’s marriage ministry has the potential to exalt God, rejuvenate marriages, and draw in the lost. Keep the grace of Jesus at the center, and you’ll see the transformation ripple through your church and beyond.¹⁹

PRINCIPLE #2 – INTENTIONALITY + INVESTMENT = RESULTS

The Problem: The Myth of “Autopilot” Marriage

One of the biggest myths couples believe is that marriage should just “work” on its own. We fall in love, and everything else will magically follow. But marriage is like any other important part of life: it requires intentionality and investment. Just as a garden needs constant care, a marriage needs ongoing attention to thrive.

But so many couples only invest when things are falling apart, or they start to work on their marriage but give up too soon, thinking it didn’t work. This cycle leaves them frustrated and disconnected.

The Plan: Long-Term, Consistent Investment

Imagine helping couples understand that their marriage

¹⁹ It is important to note that building a marriage on the foundation of grace never means tolerating or enabling physical abuse, emotional abuse, infidelity or narcissistic behaviors.

is a lifelong journey of growth and intimacy. The more they invest, the more they'll see the results they desire. But it's not a sprint—it's a marathon.

Think of your own marriage (if applicable). You and your spouse set intentional time aside—whether it's date nights or marriage discipleship sessions. Every time you invest in those moments, you grow closer, deeper, and more connected.

Marriage ministry in your church can provide couples with this path. Lead them to understand that while retreats and conferences are great jumpstarts, the real growth happens through consistent, ongoing investment. Your church can equip them with tools that will yield lifelong transformation.

PRINCIPLE #3 – HAVE FUN & BE HELPFUL

The Problem: Marriage Ministry That Feels Like a Burden

The last thing couples want is to feel like they're going to marriage boot camp. They don't want to leave sessions feeling heavy, discouraged, or overwhelmed with their shortcomings. If the journey feels more like a burden than a blessing, they'll stop engaging.

The Vision: Joy-Filled Marriage Ministry

Marriage ministry should be fun, engaging, and full of life! When couples walk into your sessions, they should be filled with hope and leave excited about the possibilities. Inject fun into your ministry. Play uplifting music, start with icebreaker questions, or even throw in light-hearted games that bring laughter and connection.

At Grace Marriage, we mix up our content to keep it engaging—one session might focus on heart-level challenges,

and the next on something light and fun. Encouragement should be woven throughout, so couples leave thinking, *“God loves me. He is for me and my marriage. My marriage can grow and thrive.”*

Your marriage ministry can be that place where couples come not just to work on their relationship, but to enjoy and reconnect. By keeping the focus on encouragement and joy, you’ll build momentum that keeps them coming back.

By centering your ministry on Jesus, encouraging intentional investment, and bringing fun and life into your sessions, you’ll create a lasting impact in your church. When the grace of God is at the heart of marriage, it becomes a ministry that changes lives—not just for a season, but for eternity.

Who? (Top Down & Bottom Up)

Churches often struggle to build sustainable, impactful marriage ministries.

Why? Because the burden typically falls on a few overworked staff members, resulting in burnout and unrealized potential. But it doesn't have to be this way!

For a marriage ministry to be sustainable, it must go beyond the shoulders of one leader or even one couple. It requires a collective approach. Marriage ministries thrive when responsibility is shared, and the mission is a united effort between leadership and the congregation. We believe leadership

sets the tone, but the congregation drives the mission.

For a marriage ministry to flourish, top-down leadership is critical. The vision must start with church leadership, championed from the pulpit, and woven into the church's mission. But here's the key—the congregation must take ownership too. Lay leaders and congregants are the heartbeat of the ministry, bringing it to life through their passion and commitment.

TOP-DOWN PARTICIPATION THE MARRIAGE LEADERSHIP TEAM

The Marriage Leadership Team. When churches build a team of passionate couples—including staff, elders, and lay leaders who are fired up about God's vision for marriage—the work of the ministry is shared. The result? A sustainable ministry that grows stronger, fueled by the gifts and dedication of the entire church.

Those on the marriage leadership team should be couples with solid marriages who are passionate about God's design for marriage and helping others grow in their marriages. Ideally, this team would include at least one staff member or elder (and their spouse) along with other lay leaders. This way, church leadership has a ready finger on the pulse of marriages within the church and how the marriage ministry is faring. The size of the church and the ministry will determine the size of the team, but it should never be just one person or one couple.

Ephesians 4:12 speaks of how God gave church leaders “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” This should be the goal of the marriage leadership team—to identify, equip, and encourage couples in

the church to serve as lay leaders in the marriage ministry. In this way, church members relieve church staff and leadership of what would be a significant burden in executing the many details and responsibilities of reaching the church's marriages along the pathway of discipleship.

Roles. Each team member should play a different role, according to their areas of giftedness and passion. You don't want to just fill needs with the closest warm body. Rather, talk to team members, learn their strengths, and ask them where they see themselves contributing the most value. For example, if one couple has a knack for welcoming others into their home or creating beautiful, inviting spaces, hospitality could be their role on the team.

Let's take a quick spin through some roles that will be helpful.

Facilitation. You will need individuals or couples to facilitate the groups. (As for what the groups will look like, we'll get to that later.) This will include being the main "voice" leading the group through the curriculum, welcoming everyone, directing couples how and when to answer the questions in the material, and keeping the meetings progressing at an engaging pace. It is very important your facilitators have a solid marriage and the ability to bring energy and life to a room. The facilitator doesn't need to have the gift of teaching but does need a heart for marriage and understand how to bring energy to the group. The number of facilitators you will need depends on how many

If married couples want to know how to love one another well, they should be able to look to the example of their leaders.

groups you have, and whether you launch a small- or large-group model.

The quality of facilitation is very important. When a facilitator lacks energy and relational skills, groups fall apart quickly. When a facilitator overtalks and dominates a session, no one wants to come back. But when a facilitator brings life to the group, follows up with participants, and leads well, groups tend to stay together and grow year over year.

Administration. You will need to have someone in charge of the administration of the ministry. This includes communication between the marriage leadership team, lay leaders, and participants, and handling the details to keep the ministry running well. Often, this is an administrative assistant on staff at the church. For some churches, it is delegated to a lay person with the gift of administration.

Hospitality. This person or persons will oversee the creation of a comfortable and inviting atmosphere for the couples attending the groups. This person needs to be someone who truly enjoys and is gifted in hospitality. This role does not have to be filled by a married person. It can be filled by a single or a widow(er) who has this gift.

Ongoing Encouragement. Give ongoing encouragement and equip the team—check in with them regularly to see what their felt needs are and how they feel the ministry is going. Without encouragement and a sense of feeling “seen,” the team will dwindle. Regular meetings, gifts, and contact (like a text chain) all contribute to members taking ownership of their place on the team and building a sense of camaraderie.

TOP-DOWN PROMOTION: LEADERSHIP SETS THE TONE & LEADS BY EXAMPLE

Setting the Tone. When it comes to promoting your marriage ministry, it's crucial to have support and involvement at the church leadership level. Without it, spreading the news of where, when, and how your church's marriage ministry will be reaching couples will be difficult. The fact is, the more important marriage is to your church, the more important it will be to the couples in your church.

It is ideal to have your church's marriage ministry regularly promoted from the pulpit. In the most effective churches, the lead minister or pastor promotes it directly to the congregation. This signals to the church body: *Healthy marriages are important to God; they are important to this church; and they should be important to you, too!*

Some churches have gotten great traction for their marriage ministry by establishing an annual "Marriage Sunday," where the sermon celebrates and casts a vision for marriage. The marriage ministry is championed and promoted clearly, which helps with both participation and retention. However, one Sunday a year is not enough. When marriage ministry is only promoted once a year, the ministry immediately surges, then declines throughout the year, then surges again after its annual mention. Reminders throughout the year must be part of the strategy to keep marriage and marriage ministry front of mind.

Leading by Example. I once had a lead pastor at a large church invite me to lunch, promising that he was going to tell me my biggest problem in ministry. Once we had our meals, he said, "Your biggest problem is us. We are busy. We

are preaching. We are out a lot of nights. We don't have great marriages. And we probably aren't going to share a vision we aren't experiencing." From what I can tell, he's largely right.

From their early days of ministry—even starting in seminary—pastors are pushed toward several things *other than* their spouse. Academic excellence, job performance, be a good shepherd, be a good teacher, counsel your flock, attend events, show up at hospitals, lead the elders, pray with the hurting, early mornings, late nights ... and this is just a sample of the pressure a church leader may feel in a given week. Very few influences—whether personal, academic, or professional—are encouraging them to invest in their marriage.

Many churches seem to give marriage lip service—*ah yes, it's your most important horizontal relationship*—but they don't take steps to promote healthy marriages within their staff and on leadership. They may encourage their staff to love their spouses well, but they aren't pushing them to go home and spend time with their spouse. They may encourage a pastor not to overwork, but they don't help develop rhythms of investment in their marriage. Every church needs to have 1) a strategy for helping its leadership and staff love their spouses with intentionality, and 2) a structure to ensure there's time and space for that to happen.

Good leadership is leading by example. If married couples want to know how to love one another well, they should be able to look to the example of their leaders. As church members see their leaders model strong, grace-filled marriages, they are motivated to follow suit, creating a ripple effect of transformation throughout the church.

If you are a church leader, find influences that will hold

you accountable in loving your spouse well. If you are in a position to make or suggest policy changes, consider this: Many churches have expectations of their team. They must attend staff meetings, quarterly retreats, and other ministry events. Wouldn't it be amazing if part of what the church required of its staff and leaders was investment in their marriage (if applicable)? It certainly seems wise considering the staggering number of people that leave ministry because of family breakdown.

BOTTOM UP—PARTICIPATION AND PROMOTION

Participation and promotion start top-down, but they're supported bottom-up. A thriving marriage ministry is one where the congregation isn't just attending—they're *leading*. By equipping lay leaders to take charge of roles like teaching, administration, and hospitality, the ministry becomes more effective and organized. The more people involved, the more momentum builds.

Couples need fresh, relevant content that encourages meaningful reflection and practical application to their marriages.

Members of the church will be part of the Marriage Leadership Team as lay leaders, and as such will play several roles. Members will help envision ways the marriage ministry can grow. Members will be the hands and feet of church leadership in reaching and encouraging marriages. They will help execute the actual physical tasks that need to be done to facilitate marriage discipleship.

In addition to serving as leaders of the marriage ministry, it is important that the congregation play a primary role in its promotion. The most powerful way to grow a marriage ministry isn't through flashy programs or big budgets—it's through the transformed lives of your members. When couples experience grace-filled transformation, they naturally become advocates, inviting their friends, neighbors, and coworkers to join in. Word-of-mouth promotion becomes a powerful tool, expanding the reach and impact of the ministry. Create avenues for current participants to share their testimonies of change; this will cultivate organic, meaningful growth.

When you empower lay leaders and tap into the gifts of your congregation, the ministry runs on passion and participation—not just staff or budget. This model is sustainable and scalable, providing churches with a plan that grows with them. With leadership and congregant buy-in, the ministry becomes a part of the church's identity, deeply woven into its culture.

Imagine the ripple effect of this approach. Couples in your congregation begin to invest intentionally in their marriages, pouring love and grace into their relationships. They see themselves as part of a bigger story—a greater mission. They support one another, hold each other accountable, and invite others into this vision of strong, Christ-centered marriages. Through the combination of leadership vision and congregational involvement, you'll create an atmosphere where marriages are consistently nurtured and strengthened, transforming lives and whole communities for generations to come.

What? (The Content)

THE BIG QUESTION

Many churches desire an ongoing marriage ministry but struggle with where to begin. The good news is that Grace Marriage and other marriage ministries have already developed content that makes it easier for your church to launch and sustain a thriving marriage discipleship program. How do you choose the right content for your church body?

Things to Consider:

- How do you choose content that fits with the rhythms

of your church?

- How do you provide material that will engage couples at every stage of their marriage, regardless of when they join or how long they've been married?
- How can you offer fresh, relevant material each session to keep couples coming back for more?

Our Solution:

Grace Marriage has developed seven years of content designed specifically to grow and enrich marriages of any age or stage. The best part? The curriculum is structured in a way that a couple can join at any time without missing out—none of the content builds on previous years.

This gives churches the flexibility to integrate marriage discipleship into their existing ministry rhythms without having to create content from scratch.

Couples need fresh, relevant content that encourages meaningful reflection and practical application to their marriages. Grace Marriage's curriculum uses video lessons and accompanying worksheets that help couples not only learn but also put what they've learned into action immediately.

Grace Marriage content is designed around two main components: *Rhythms* and *Core Lessons*. These are the cornerstones of each session, and they provide a comprehensive approach to marriage growth, covering the daily habits that strengthen relationships and the bigger, “meatier” topics that every marriage must navigate.

THE RHYTHMS

The Big Question:

In marriage, consistency matters. How can we help couples develop rhythms that create lasting change in their marriages, day by day?

Our Solution:

Grace Marriage introduces three key rhythms: Gratitude, Connection, and Investment. These are called “rhythms” because they are designed to become regular habits in the daily lives of couples, helping them continually invest in their marriages.

Gratitude: This rhythm, called the “Eye Exam,” encourages couples to regularly express appreciation for each other, keeping positivity at the forefront of their relationship.

Connection: This rhythm is called the “Intimacy Igniter,” and creates opportunities for emotional and relational connection, strengthening intimacy.

Investment: The “621 Challenge” guides couples to apply the words of Matthew 6:21 to their marriage—“where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” This rhythm helps couples plan time together to intentionally invest time and energy into their marriage.

Each time the rhythms are covered, the content and worksheets change, so couples are always encountering fresh ideas and applications. The goal is to make these rhythms



second nature in their marriage, resulting in deeper connection and mutual respect.

CORE LESSONS

The Big Question:

In addition to developing healthy daily rhythms, couples also need tools to tackle the tougher, more complex issues that arise in any relationship, such as communication, conflict, money, and intimacy.

Our Solution:

In addition to the rhythms, each session also includes *Core Lessons*. These lessons are more substantial and address important topics like:

- ***Grace:*** Understanding and applying grace in everyday marital interactions.
- ***Communication:*** Developing skills for clear and loving communication.
- ***Sex and Intimacy:*** Building a healthy, mutually satisfying sexual relationship.
- ***Conflict Management:*** Handling disagreements constructively.
- ***Money:*** Aligning financial goals and navigating money management together.
- ***Family of Origin:*** Exploring how each spouse's upbringing affects their marriage.
- ***Technology Management:*** Setting boundaries for tech use in the home.

Even the best marriages face significant challenges. How

can you ensure conversations on these topics happen in a healthy, productive way that brings couples closer together instead of driving them apart?

Research shows that at least eight hours of skills-based education significantly improves marital outcomes.²⁰ Our goal is to create a safe, constructive space where couples can dive deep into these important topics and gain tools they can use when challenges arise later.

Each lesson follows a consistent format:

1. *Short Video Teaching* – Brief, focused lessons that present the key concepts.
2. *Application Worksheets* – These worksheets help each spouse reflect and apply what they’ve learned to their own marriage.
3. *Couple Discussion Time* – After filling out their worksheets, couples discuss what they’ve learned with each other. This structured discussion is often the most transformative part of the session.
4. *Group Reflection* – Finally, couples share insights and learn from others in their group, reinforcing the main points of the lesson.

These lessons not only provide couples with practical skills, but they also give each spouse a chance to be heard and to better understand their partner’s point of view.

Couples will continue to build on the skills they learn in each session. As they go through the rhythms and core lessons, they will see meaningful growth in their relationship. One couple shared, “Issues that were once very difficult for us are now relatively easy to discuss.”

²⁰ Endgame, J.P. DeGance and Dr. John Van Epp.

That's the power of ongoing marriage discipleship: real, lasting transformation. Couples grow stronger, learn new skills, and are equipped to navigate the ups and downs of marriage with grace, patience, and understanding. By choosing Grace Marriage's content, your church is providing couples with the tools and rhythms they need for a thriving marriage. Whether they're working on daily habits or tackling complex issues, our curriculum meets couples where they are and helps them move forward—together.

When? (The Models)

There is no single “best” way to run a marriage ministry. Different models work better in different church contexts. It’s essential to choose a model that meets the specific needs of your congregation while being sensitive to the church’s rhythms. Grace Marriage offers flexible models for marriage discipleship, each designed to promote about sixteen hours of marriage investment per year.

As you consider each of the below, keep in mind that consistency is more important than the model itself. The most workable model for your church will be the most effective. The right structure can ensure that marriage discipleship becomes an integral and sustainable part of your church’s ministry.

QUARTERLY MODEL

Big Picture:

The quarterly model is designed around the idea that momentum in any goal, including marriage, tends to drop off after about 90 days. By meeting every 90 days, couples have a set rhythm for regularly investing in their marriage and ensuring it stays on track. In this model, couples dedicate a block of time—typically four hours on a Saturday morning—to focus on their relationship.

Things to Consider:

- Quarterly meetings are long enough to make a real impact, without being overwhelming or requiring frequent attendance.
- The 90-day interval allows couples to reflect on their relationship and make adjustments before too much time has passed
- Four hours is an ideal length for teaching, reflecting, and engaging in meaningful one-on-one discussion without feeling rushed.

How We Help:

Grace Marriage provides churches with the tools to implement the quarterly model seamlessly. We offer short teaching segments, reflection exercises, worksheets, and structured discussion guides to help couples connect and grow during these four-hour sessions. This model is perfect for churches that want to provide regular, intentional marriage investment without disrupting other ministries or programs.

12-SESSION MODEL

Big Picture:

The 12-session model breaks down marriage discipleship into shorter, more frequent meetings—each lasting approximately 90 minutes. This format offers flexibility, allowing churches to meet in various ways, whether *monthly* or in *two six-week blocks*. This model fits neatly into the existing rhythm of the church calendar, making it a great option for churches looking for consistency in their marriage ministry.

Things to Consider:

- The shorter, regular sessions integrate well with weekly or monthly church programs.
- The flexibility of this model means it can be used in homes, small groups, or in a church setting at different times throughout the year.
- The 12-session model offers a structured, manageable way to disciple couples over time.

How We Help:

Grace Marriage supports churches in implementing the twelve-session model with adaptable content that fits into any format. Whether your church chooses to meet monthly or in two blocks, we provide the resources to keep couples engaged and growing in their marriages. The shorter sessions are easy to manage and fit into existing small groups or Bible study times.

12-SESSION MODEL: SIX & SIX FORMAT

Big Picture:

In the Six & Six format of the 12-session model, churches divide their twelve sessions into two blocks—one in the spring and one in the fall. This structure maintains momentum throughout the year while allowing for a summer break. However, to keep the marriage ministry visible and active during the summer, churches can host a marriage event, such as a date night or a special speaker, to encourage sign-ups and continued engagement.

Things to Consider:

- The Six & Six model provides a natural break during the summer while keeping couples invested throughout the year.
- Summer events provide an excellent opportunity to boost involvement and raise awareness about the marriage ministry.
- This format works well for churches that want to follow the traditional school-year schedule, with summers reserved for special events.

How We Help:

Grace Marriage provides all the content needed for a successful Six & Six model. Churches can seamlessly integrate the curriculum into their spring and fall schedules, with special event ideas for the summer to keep couples engaged. This model is great for churches looking to maintain marriage discipleship without overwhelming the calendar.

12-SESSION MODEL: MONTHLY FORMAT

Big Picture:

The monthly format of the 12-session model is designed for couples to take time once a month to focus on their marriage. This model works well in homes or small groups and can also be done on the church campus. By offering a monthly check-in, churches can help couples maintain regular connection points without the time commitment of more frequent meetings.

Things to Consider:

- The monthly model fits well within existing small group structures or home-based meetings, offering flexibility for both the church and the couples involved.
- It provides regular touchpoints throughout the year, helping couples stay on track without requiring a heavy time commitment.
- Monthly meetings work well for churches that want to provide consistent marriage investment in a less frequent format.

How We Help:

Grace Marriage's curriculum is flexible enough to be used monthly in homes or small groups. We provide teaching materials, facilitator guides, and worksheets that make it easy to stay engaged and keep couples growing. Whether you're meeting in homes or on campus, the monthly model provides a consistent opportunity for marriage discipleship.

A WORD ON WELL-STRUCTURED SESSIONS

Whether you choose the quarterly or one of the 12-session models, each session is structured to ensure maximum engagement. Sessions are designed to be a mix of teaching, personal reflection, private couple discussions, and group reflection. This structure catches all learning styles, helping with content retention and ensuring that couples remain engaged.

Teaching segments are short and focused, allowing couples to quickly understand key concepts. We've found that the private discussions between couples are the most transformative part of each session, offering them the chance to connect deeply and apply the lessons to their lives. And finally, group discussions help reinforce the key points and allow couples to learn from others' experiences.

Each model allows for a well-balanced structure that combines teaching, reflection, and discussion. Each session moves quickly and keeps couples engaged, focusing on the most important part—the private discussion time between spouses. We believe this approach promotes real transformation in marriages by creating space for meaningful connection and conversation.

By choosing the model that best fits your church, you can create a sustainable and impactful marriage ministry. Grace Marriage is here to support you with the tools, curriculum, and guidance you need to help couples invest in their marriages and see real, lasting transformation.

Where? (Determining the Best Setting)

After selecting the ideal model for your church's marriage discipleship, the next step will be deciding where and how to host your groups. The location and size of the groups can significantly impact the atmosphere, engagement, and overall success of the ministry. Churches must choose whether to host marriage groups on-campus or in homes and whether the groups will be large or small.

SMALL GROUP MODEL

In the small group model, each group is led by a trained

facilitator who guides a small number of couples through the curriculum. This format provides an intimate setting where couples can engage deeply with each other, fostering a close-knit community that encourages vulnerability and genuine discussion. It's particularly beneficial for building relationships that can sustain commitment and boost retention.

Things to Consider:

- Small groups create a more personalized atmosphere where meaningful conversations can take place.
- The relational bonds that develop in small groups tend to enhance attendance and long-term engagement, as couples become more invested in each other's growth.
- Facilitators play a key role in cultivating a supportive environment that encourages participation.

How We Help:

Grace Marriage supports churches that choose the small group model by offering a clear structure for facilitators, guiding them on how to foster intimate discussions and create a safe space for sharing. We also provide materials and discussion prompts to help facilitators maintain group engagement. This model is ideal for churches looking to build deep community among couples and provide a highly relational discipleship experience.

LARGE GROUP MODEL

In the large group model, couples gather in a shared space, such as a sanctuary or fellowship hall, and sit at round tables. A single facilitator leads the session from the front,

creating a structured environment for group learning. Each table engages in discussion based on the facilitator's guidance. This model allows for scalability—one facilitator can lead over 100 couples—making it easy to administer while still fostering group participation.

Things to Consider:

- Large groups can accommodate a higher number of participants with fewer facilitators.
- This model is especially useful for churches with a broad reach, ensuring that all couples have access to marriage discipleship without overextending leadership.
- Careful attention should be paid to the room size to maintain energy and engagement. Large spaces with sparse attendance can negatively affect the atmosphere.

How We Help:

Grace Marriage offers step-by-step guidance on how to effectively run a large group model. We provide curriculum materials, facilitator scripts, and group discussion questions that make the facilitator's role simple and impactful, regardless of the number of participants. This model is perfect for churches seeking a marriage ministry that can reach a broad audience with minimal staff.

HOME GROUPS

For some churches, space constraints or a desire to promote more personal interaction may lead to hosting marriage groups in homes. Home groups offer an intimate setting where couples can comfortably engage in discussions.

The smaller size of home groups allows for a more personalized experience, and these gatherings can foster strong connections among participants.

Things to Consider:

- The size of a home group will largely depend on the host couple's comfort level and the size of their home.
- Home groups can adapt to both quarterly sessions or a 12-session model, making them flexible for churches with space limitations.
- Homes offer a warm, inviting atmosphere that can draw couples into deeper community and even attract people outside the church to participate.

How We Help:

Grace Marriage encourages and equips churches to launch home groups by providing a flexible structure that works for a range of group sizes and meeting frequencies. Home groups are an ideal solution for churches facing space challenges, and they also create a more intimate setting that fosters strong relationships. As a bonus, home groups can be an outreach tool, bringing new people into the church community.

THE MATTER OF ROOM SIZE

Whether your groups meet in homes, on-campus, or in a large gathering space, the room size must match the group size. A room that's too big for the group will feel empty and drain the energy from the session, even if participation is strong. Conversely, a space that's too small can feel cramped and uncomfortable, limiting interaction and engagement.

Things to Consider:

- The room size should feel cozy without being crowded, ensuring there's enough space for movement and conversation.
- In large group settings, make sure the venue doesn't dwarf the number of attendees. Even a well-attended session can feel sparse in a massive room.
- Be mindful of the proportion of participants to space to maintain the right energy and atmosphere.

How We Help:

Grace Marriage offers practical tips on selecting the right-sized space for your groups. Whether you're hosting a small group in a classroom or a large group in a sanctuary, we help you think through how to create the best atmosphere for each setting. We also provide insights on room setup, ensuring that couples feel comfortable, engaged, and ready to participate.

By choosing the right group size, location, and room setup, your church can create an environment where marriages thrive. We're here to help with all the tools you need to make the right decision for your unique context, ensuring your marriage discipleship ministry is a success—whether you go small, large, or somewhere in between.

How? (Effective Promotion; Successful Launch)

PROMOTE WITH INTENTIONALITY

For any marriage ministry to be effective, it needs to be promoted clearly and strategically. The ministry must engage both leadership and the congregation, ensuring it doesn't get lost in a sea of other announcements or become "white noise." Striking the right balance between over-promotion and under-promotion is crucial. If it's promoted too long, people stop paying attention. If it's under-promoted, it never gains the traction it needs.

Things to Consider:

- A clear timeline for promotion is essential.
- Consistent but measured communication across platforms ensures the message sticks without becoming overwhelming.
- Highlight the unique benefits of investing in marriage, emphasizing that this is not just another program but a vital ministry of the church.

How We Help:

Grace Marriage provides all the materials you need for a successful promotion. We recommend a focused, four-week promotional plan leading up to the launch date, utilizing resources like videos, emails, and social media templates that we provide. This plan includes:

- *Church-wide Emails:* Sample emails to inform and engage your congregation.
- *Pulpit Announcements:* Messages encouraging the congregation to invest in their marriages.
- *Social Media Graphics:* Eye-catching designs to build excitement about the ministry.
- *Grassroots Efforts:* Ideas for encouraging leaders and congregants to spread the word and invite others.

Throughout the year, we encourage ongoing promotion as new sessions approach to ensure retention and growth, helping new couples easily join at any time.

PURPOSEFUL MESSAGING

How you communicate the marriage ministry's purpose is crucial. This isn't just a "program"; it's a vital part of discipleship. Couples must feel they're not joining a one-off initiative but rather are joining a movement that places value on God's gift of marriage. They must understand that the church's commitment to discipleship includes discipling marriages, and that the church's family ministry has three prongs—children, youth, and marriage.

Things to Consider:

- Avoid framing the ministry as a "fix" for couples in crisis. Instead, highlight the idea of ongoing investment in marriage as a proactive measure, not a reactive one.
- Help couples see that their participation is part of a bigger mission—supporting healthy marriages within the church and pushing back against cultural norms that devalue commitment.

How We Help:

Grace Marriage equips you with messaging that frames the ministry as part of your church's mission. We emphasize that this is not a crisis ministry; it's a discipleship process. Our tools help you present this concept in such a way that couples feel excited and empowered to be part of a movement that values marriage at every stage.

We also help remove any stigma associated with joining a marriage ministry. Couples should feel proud to invest in their marriage—not embarrassed.

PARTICIPANT INVESTMENT

People don't value what they don't invest in. Whether it's time, money, or commitment, true transformation happens when people have "skin in the game." Charging a modest fee increases engagement and ensures that participants take the ministry seriously.

Things to Consider:

- Charging even a small amount for marriage events or sessions leads to higher participation rates.
- Encourage couples to view this financial investment as part of a broader commitment to ongoing growth in their marriage.

How We Help:

Grace Marriage encourages participant financial investment to strengthen their commitment. We've seen firsthand how even a small fee dramatically increases attendance and long-term engagement. We offer plenty of suggestions on how to communicate the value of participant investment, should you need help.

LAUNCH WITH EXCELLENCE

To set a marriage ministry up for success, the launch needs to be seamless and supported by the church leadership. Just as a marriage requires continuous investment, so does a thriving marriage ministry. The church should demonstrate its commitment by dedicating budget funds, time, and creativity to the ministry. Additionally, couples should understand that their investment—both time and financial—is a key part of their growth.

Things to Consider:

- Allocate a portion of the church budget specifically for marriage ministry to demonstrate the church's commitment. These funds can go toward session hospitality, offering childcare at the church so more couples can attend, etc.
- Ensure the launch day reflects the value of marriage ministry by making the environment inviting and celebratory.
- Create a model that fosters long-term participation by not requiring yearly re-enrollment, as this simplifies administration and keeps momentum strong.
- Be responsive to feedback, especially from volunteer leaders, but don't assume that one negative comment is representative of the group experience. Look for patterns in feedback and be responsive there.

How We Help:

Our goal is that you are encouraged, inspired and equipped. There are many helpful and biblically sound marriage curriculums and ministries. We pray you find what is most helpful and effective in your church.

If you choose to partner with Grace Marriage, we will do everything in our power to help you disciple marriages well. We will have a marriage ministry specialist available to you through each step of the process. This specialist will answer questions and provide whatever help you need the entire time you are partnered with Grace Marriage in conducting your ongoing marriage ministry.

And remember, Grace Marriage is not a program in your church. We are just equipping you to do marriage ministry. So

when you promote, make your church primary. Couples will be part of *your* marriage ministry; they won't be joining a Grace Marriage or other program.

YOUR CHEAT SHEET FOR A SUCCESSFUL LAUNCH

Whatever you do, don't feel overwhelmed. Launching an ongoing marriage ministry does not have to be complicated. Everything you need has been created for you—promotional materials, schedules, curriculum, videos, and everything else are ready and waiting. All you need to do is follow a simple plan:

- Decide on a model (12-session or quarterly) and choose your dates.
- Put together a marriage leadership team (find people for the roles of administration, hospitality, facilitation, and promotion).
- Put together a promotional schedule: emails (we have templates for you); announcements; and take sign-ups.
- Find a facilitator(s) for your sessions; we've got all the training material they'll need.
- Prepare the meeting room(s) with generosity and fun in mind.
- Have your sessions!
- Continue to promote your ongoing marriage ministry to drive participation, retention, and growth.

By structuring your marriage ministry around these guidelines and principles, your church will be equipped to effectively promote, launch, and sustain a thriving ministry that supports marriages for the long term.

Conclusion

Right now, we have the incredible opportunity to be part of a movement that could change the face of marriage in our culture. What an honor to make marriage a central focus in our churches and in our homes! We have the chance to push back against the tidal wave of family breakdown and divorce, and to reclaim marriage as something sacred and powerful. The truth is, if God hates divorce, you can be sure Satan is doing everything he can to fuel it. This is a spiritual battle we must engage in if we want to see any real transformation in our society.

Yes, the mission is challenging. It won't be easy. But it's a mission we cannot afford to walk away from—if we lose this fight, we lose the war for the heart of the family and the foundation of society. And you are standing on the frontlines of that war. Thank you for reading this, for caring about this, and for being willing to join us in this fight. By investing in your own marriage, encouraging other couples to do the same,

and championing your church's marriage ministry, you are partnering with God in doing Kingdom work.

We believe that as you and others take this challenge seriously, marriages will catch fire, and what seems difficult now will soon gain unstoppable momentum. Once we reach that tipping point, we'll watch in awe as marriage discipleship spreads like wildfire, transforming lives and communities everywhere. What starts with a few intentional churches will soon become a widespread movement where discipling marriages is not the exception but the norm in Bible-believing churches.

Grace Marriage began by equipping just one church, and as of this writing, we're honored to work with over 10,000 participants in hundreds of churches. But this movement isn't just about Grace Marriage. It's about the Church waking up to its calling. The Church is a sleeping giant when it comes to marriage; once roused, it could completely turn the tide for the family with its power and impact. And you have the privilege of being part of the wake-up call—through the beauty of your marriage and through the influence you have in your church and community.

Remember, our mission isn't just for Grace Marriage to reach every church. Our mission is *for every church to disciple marriages*, to honor and invest in this God-given covenant. So step up. Help your church see the need for action. Partner with other marriage ministries. Pour your time, resources, and energy into lifting marriage to the place of honor it deserves.

The future is bright for marriage, for the Church, and for families. The potential for impact is immense. Let's step into that bright future together and ignite a movement that will bless generations to come.

Marriage ministry *reimagined.*



ASSESS + ENGAGE + GROW

**An ongoing path and plan toward
healthy, Christ-centered marriages.**

We help churches reimagine marriage ministry
and equip husbands and wives to build
marriages that reflect the Gospel.



[GraceMarriage.com](https://www.GraceMarriage.com)

grace
marriage

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GUIDED PATHWAY

A unique experience, designed for married couples.

Each Grace Marriage series includes beautifully crafted journal-style workbooks that seamlessly blend reflection, connection and a plan for relational growth.

Featuring engaging worksheets and exclusive digital resources, this unique tool empowers married couples to deepen their relationship and nurture their marriage together.



Video Sessions



Engaging Worksheets



Exclusive Site Access



Resource Toolbox



Marriage Assessment



Weekly Check-ins

gracemarriage



CORE LESSONS

BUILDING BLOCKS
FOR A STRONG
MARRIAGE

Discover the beauty of intentionally investing in your marriage together.

On your journey of marriage investment and intentionally, you will explore various topics to enrich, protect, and grow your marriage.

You'll grow in grace, communication, physical intimacy, and other areas. See every session as an opportunity to grow closer to Christ and one another.

Along the way, you will dig into Scripture, ask your spouse questions you may have never thought of before, and be challenged to share from your heart.



Why BUILDING BLOCKS?
GraceMarriage.com/lessons

We believe the God who designed and delights in marriage will honor your investment.

"Let marriage be held in honor among all..."
Hebrews 13:4a

gracemarriage	CHARACTER & CONNECTION	● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	IIA
gracemarriage	INVESTMENT MENTALITY	○ ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	IB
gracemarriage	MAGNETIC MARRIAGE	○ ○ ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	IA
gracemarriage	PRIORITY MINDSET	○ ○ ○ ○ ● ○ ○ ○	AI
gracemarriage	LIFE INTENTIONAL	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○	III
gracemarriage	MARRIAGE ENHANCER	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ● ○	II
gracemarriage	THE FOUNDATION	○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ●	I

ASSESS + ENGAGE + GROW

Marriages that reflect the grace of Jesus are cultivated and disciplined.

When couples build their marriage on the gospel and get intentional, marriage comes alive. It becomes life-giving, joy-filled, and one of God's greatest gifts. Thriving marriages do not happen by accident. They happen when we disciple couples before crisis hits and give marriage the priority it deserves.

The results are undeniable. Homes are transformed. Children and youth become more reachable. Families grow healthier. Churches become more effective. As one church leader said, "If our marriages aren't working, nothing is working."

Marriage impacts everything. When marriages are marked by grace, they radiate life, hope, and the love of Jesus to a watching world.

This book will help you identify the marriage ministry gap in your church, embrace key principles for effective discipleship, and implement a clear, ongoing pathway to strengthen couples.

Our prayer is that you will join us in a movement to see marriages come alive so that homes, churches, and communities reflect Christ's love to the world.



Brad Rhoads co-founded Grace Marriage with his wife, Marilyn, in 2015 to help churches and couples focus on building strong, thriving marriages.

Together, they create curriculum, speak at conferences, and invest in individual couples. Brad and Marilyn are proud parents of five wonderful kids and call Owensboro, Kentucky, home.



Brittany Cragg edits and authors marriage curriculum as the Director of Content for Grace Marriage. She has a degree in English

Literature from Wheaton College and a law degree from Emory University. Brittany and her husband, Mark, live with their three children in Prosper, Texas.

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