

# FROM THIS DAY FORWARD

*A Two-Year Plan for Small-Group Marriage Mentoring*

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## A Crumbling Institution—Why Married Couples Need Mentors

During 2002–2003 I learned of three young newlywed couples who separated soon after marriage. One marriage ended within the first year, and the other two—although the couples made it past their one-year anniversary—also ended in divorce. In two of these cases I tried, unsuccessfully, to engage the struggling couples and offer help. Adding to the tragedy of these outcomes was that the parents of these young couples felt incapable of helping, much less intervening, to at least slow the breakups and encourage these young couples to wait and try to work through their issues.



At about that time, I read a disturbing article by Gina Dalfonzo entitled “Temporarily Yours.” Dalfonzo described a “starter marriage” as one in which couples marry in their twenties and end the marriages within five years. They typically have no children. Their experiment with marriage is much like trying a “starter home.” They learn that it is not suitable and decide it would be easier to sell this one and look for a better one the next time around than work with the house they have. Dalfonzo cited interviews with couples who concluded that their marriages had been a mistake from the beginning. The logic was flawless in a disposable society loath to considering consequences and focusing on the “it’s all about my happiness” palaver. Their “logic” of deeming marriage as a disposable condition angered me.

I am not a social scientist but it seems to me that several factors have contributed to this growing trend.

1. **Broken homes are often the norm.** Many twenty- and thirty-year-old adults grew up in a family setting that experienced divorce and/or they grew up in single-parent homes.
2. **The loss of the stigma of divorce.** In a context where high percentages of adults grew up in a broken home, plus the large percentages of divorced individuals, it is easier to find understanding and even encouragement to divorce.
3. **The loss of long-term examples.** When you add the above two factors, obviously few good long-term marriages are around for young couples to observe or emulate.

## Long-Term Role Models—What Married Couples Long For

I had the privilege of serving as a pastor, a spiritually noble service, for twenty years. During those years I officiated at many weddings. Most were preceded by premarital counseling, which included reading, studying, inventories, and meeting over several months with counselors or mentor couples. Even with these tools, something often was awry. My wife, Cindy, and I were speakers at marriage conferences for many years, and we observed the vacuum of solid, decent, long-term equipping for marriage. I concluded it was not for a lack of resources that many marriages fail, but for the lack of good models over a longer period of time.

For years I’ve preached that we need like-minded, mature Christian friends to walk with us all of our lives.

We need solid committed couple friends—friends who love Christ, study His Word, are committed to the local church, and so on.

When our own kids were toddlers, it was helpful to talk with parents whose kids were older and were doing well. Then when we had teens it was good to learn from mature Christian couples how they had raised their teens. Each phase of life is crucial, and we can lose so much if we don't glean wisdom from men and women who have walked where we're walking. When it's our turn to be the mature ones, to pass on what we've learned to others, we need to resist the self-deprecating notion that we have nothing to offer. We need to keep an "always learning" attitude at every stage of life, realizing that what worked with one child won't necessarily work with another and that what worked twenty years ago may not work in the twenty-first century. However, the principles and encouragement we have to pass on remain the same.

One factor I had to overcome in taking on a mentoring role was, "Will these young couples listen to someone my age?" As we get older we can tend to become rigid in our thinking and may think we're incapable of relating to those younger than we are. We might perceive that the younger couple will have difficulty relating to us.

As part of my information gathering, I enlisted younger staff members at the church and eventually talked with young men over lunch about how they'd feel if a couple in their forties or fifties offered a marriage mentoring relationship. To my surprise, they welcomed and encouraged the idea. I think the key for older couples is always being in a "learning posture," not a "when I was your age..." or pontificating against the ills of "this generation." It requires a mature Christian couple to mentor younger couples. "Know it alls" need not be in a leadership position, as their attitude will only alienate young couples.



## Ground Rules—A Blueprint for Successful Mentoring

The major key, in my opinion, to the success of this kind of relationship is setting the expectation bar very high. Often we lament, "People aren't committed." I believe this conclusion is largely due to the bar having been set too low. I'm not suggesting a heavy-handed approach, but rather an attitude that expresses that "this is going to require a lot of your time. If you don't have the time, it's better not to commit." We need to use our resources and valuable time with couples who are serious about their marriages. After all, the Marine Corps turns away applicants but also produces the highest commitment of servicemen and women, because they set the bar high. For our program, we required a two-year commitment and the agreement from the very beginning that each couple would start their own small group after our two years together ended. In other words, the admission price was high. We expected the couples participating to make the group a priority in their lives and in turn to continue by leading their own group after this one had run its course. For them it will be a major time commitment. Obviously, this is also true for you as the mentoring couple. For the leaders and group members (I recommend a group size of five or six couples in addition to the leaders), the commitment involves the following factors:

- A weekly two-hour meeting (Our group met on Sunday evenings from 5:30-7:30pm. As we got to know our group, rarely did they leave before 8:30pm. We hosted the group in our home. I tried to have breakfast, coffee, or lunch with the men a few times during the two years. I did not “publish” this as one of my commitments, but I did it as time allowed and as I saw the need in individual men.)
- Refreshments at all the meetings (For the first two to three weeks we provided the refreshments ourselves and after that we passed out a sign-up list. Providing food demonstrated our care to the couples, it broke the ice the first few meetings. We set the standard—not too much, not too little—and occasionally we’d put on a serious meal. Some young couples will be on tight budgets, others will not. We let them “pair up” if needed.)
- Sufficient preparation for each session
- Scripture memorization and recitation during meetings
- Giving this group priority over other activities (For example, if a couple was involved in another Bible study or small group, the mentoring group would have to take the priority over the other when necessary. If they had a busy schedule or traveled often, they could not be in the group. We expected them to be available for this group.)
- More responsibility placed on the men in the group to lead and facilitate meetings, in a time frame determined by the leader (I slowly handed over leadership—in small portions—in about eight months. By the beginning of the second year, others were doing most of the facilitating. This is variable and dependent upon the maturity, teachability, and responsiveness of the group. I wanted them to observe how I facilitated and prepared the meetings, handled expectations and individuals who talk too much or not enough, and so on. When I started handing over the leadership, I would meet or at least call or communicate by email with each one, to learn what they intended to do and how I might help them in preparation. Eventually, the men in the group were leading the weekly meetings. At the same time, even though you hand over some of the leadership, they will look to you when they have a problem, challenge, or difficult lesson.)
- A commitment to start their own small group after the two years (At about the 18-month time frame, we started encouraging them to think of what they’d want to do and suggesting resources they might want to use. By the end of the two years, it was our goal to have clearly identified each couple’s plan for their own small group.)

*When it’s our turn to be the mature ones, to pass on what we’ve learned to others, we need to resist the self-deprecating notion that we have nothing to offer.*

Here are a couple of resources that may help you develop your small-group leadership skills before you begin:

- a. *Getting Together: A Guide for Good Groups* by Emory Griffin (InterVarsity Press)
- b. *Good Things Come in Small Groups* by Steve Barker (NavPress)

## Core Curriculum—Suggested Tools for Marriage Building

The following is a list of suggested resources to use for each segment of the two-year study. As your time together progresses, I recommend increasing the commitment level and the depth and weight of the material covered.

**Introduction.** During your initial meeting, cover ground rules, expectations, requirements, introducing the schedule, syllabus, and expectations.

**Segment One - Basic Marriage Concepts.** For the first 10-16 weeks we used two workbooks from the *HomeBuilders* series by FamilyLife. They have over 10 different studies to choose from, and most are 8-10 weeks long. These are easy materials to use and to facilitate. I suggest you consider *Starting Your Marriage Out Right* or *Conflict Management in Marriage*. This decision will be based on your initial impression of the needs of the group.

**Segment Two - Stewardship.** An excellent resource I recommend is Dave Ramsey's *Financial Peace University*. This tool walks couples and individuals through a biblical approach to budgeting, planning for emergencies, eliminating debt and saving for the future. Fellowship offers this 13-week course in the fall and winter semesters. You could also do this course in a small group or community group setting (facilitator needed), or as a couple online at [www.DaveRamsey.com](http://www.DaveRamsey.com).

Crown Financial Ministries offers a 10-week course, *Biblical Financial Study*, which requires a person or couple to have been through the study once before they can lead others. In my 20-plus years of ministry, I have seen no better "shrink wrapped" study than this one by Crown. If the mentor couple has not been through this personally, they may want to bring in a Crown-trained person to lead the study (and it will give them a little reprieve from leading the group). Young couples especially will benefit from these biblical principles in their lifetime of stewardship.

### Suggested Sources:

- a. *The Financial Peace University* (FPU) kit by Dave Ramsey. This kit includes Dave's bestseller, *Financial Peace Revisited*, the audio sessions on CD, the FPU workbook and the envelope system supplies.
- b. *The Total Money Makeover* by Dave Ramsey. In this #1 bestseller Dave Ramsey condenses his 17 years of financial teaching and counseling into seven organized, easy-to-follow steps that will lead you out of debt and into a Total Money Makeover. Plus, you'll read over 50 real-life stories from people just like you who have followed these principles and are now winning with their money. It is a plan designed for everyone, regardless of income or age.
- c. *Your Finances in Changing Times* by Larry Burkett. This is Burkett's first book and is foundational in understanding the rest of his books. He covers the changing economy, God's principles for finances and God's plan for your finances.
- d. *The New Master Your Money: A Step-by-Step Plan for Financial Freedom* by Ron Blue with Jeremy White. With basic biblical insights on finances, Ron Blue also gives guidance on financial management and cash flow. There is an especially good chapter on "The Myths of Inflation."

**Segment Three - Personal Bible Study Skill Development.** This was the longest segment of the two years. The couples are given a reading and study schedule that will take them about 30–45 minutes a day.

**Suggested Sources:**

- a. *Living by The Book* by Howard Hendricks and William Hendricks
- b. *The New Joy of Discovery* by Oletta Wald

There are many other good resources on Bible study methods. When we entered this stage of the small group, I reminded them of the time commitment they had made in the beginning. They were expected to come to the group having read the chapters and done any exercises in that particular section of the book.

Additionally, we were studying and applying the principles from Hendricks and Wald in books of the Bible. We studied Ephesians and selected Psalms. I also chose central marriage passages such as Genesis 2:20–3:24; 1 Corinthians 7:1–15; 1 Peter 3:1–12; (Ephesians 5:22–33 would be covered in depth in the study on the Book of Ephesians); Colossians 3:18–25; Revelation 19:7–10. This segment is the core of the mentoring process.

**Segment Four - Systematic Theology.** Some will question the rationale and need of this, but I am convinced most people do not know why they believe what they say they believe. Many excellent single volume theology handbooks are available. The length of time you spend on this area depends on which volume you select.

Typically, I'd expect your small group to spend no less than one to two hours a week on personal study time, so

***Bible study is the core of the mentoring process.***

you can parcel out the reading according to chapter divisions. You will need to think ahead of key issues you want them to wrestle with. For example, when they are leading their own group someday, they will face questions about different teachings on baptism, gifts, assurance of

salvation, election and predestination, the reliability of the Bible, different judgments in the Bible, and so on. A systematic theology handbook is an easy way for them to learn about these issues, to systematically study the Bible at the same time, and to derive good answers from the Bible. You may want to check these out in advance and select one. After a few chapters, have the men in the small group start leading/facilitating the meetings.

**Suggested Sources:**

- a. *Basic Theology* by Charles Ryrie is an exceptional book that is easy to read. Ryrie does not delve into minute or abstract theology. Depending on your preference, this may be the “entry level” theology.
- b. *Practical Christian Theology* by Floyd Barackman. Barackman covers some areas in a little more depth than Ryrie does. He comes from a Baptist background. Not as readable as Ryrie's book, but helpful in that he treats a wider set of issues.
- c. *The Moody Handbook of Theology* by Paul P. Enns. An exceptional resource.
- d. *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* by J. I. Packer. Too short as a stand-alone volume but a good additional reference.
- e. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* by Wayne Grudem and John Piper. This is a required text as a reference but would be too much for the average group to read through. Select chapters and offer as a reference to deal with difficult issues like submission, headship, leadership, and so forth. The entire book is available free online at <http://www.cbmw.org/rbmw/>.

**Segment Five - Various Popular Marriage and Family Books.** After the journey through theology, it is good to let up the pressure a little. By now your group has been exposed to the Bible and theology, and it's a good time to practice what they've learned by reading some marriage books on the practicalities of living. This segment can be used as a time for critique and for checking out different resources they might use in their own studies. By now, the couples are doing all the leading in the group.

**Suggested Sources:**

- a. *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman. This is an excellent practical resource for understanding how to express love effectively to your spouse.
- b. *The Marriage Builder* by Larry Crabb
- c. *The Four Loves* by C. S. Lewis
- d. *Building Strong Marriages* by Dennis Rainey
- e. *Sacred Marriage* by Gary Thomas

**Segment Six - Ready for Launch.** In the last two months before the study ends, you will want to help the couple's research and select what they want to do in their own small group. Obviously, it would be easy for them to simply repeat what you've done. If they want to do something different, you could suggest a young parenting group, an outreach group, leading FPU or Crown groups, a new believers group, etc.



As the last couple of months grew near, I opened it up to their discussion more and more. Asked what topics they wanted to think about as they got ready for a small group. You can also bring in several different ideas for small-group materials and then come up with a list. Some couples will not be capable of doing what you've done in your study, so you might take them aside midway and encourage them to team up with another couple. One couple in our group had a burden for their neighbors, so they started neighborhood Bible studies. Another decided to head up a young couples Sunday school class that also had several small groups out of the larger class. The thing I stress here is moving forward into a life-time of ministry as a couple. Here are a few resources you can use as small-group curriculum:

- a. *Spiritual Leadership* by Oswald Sanders. Includes a study guide.
- b. *Unlocking the Bible Story Study Guide* by Colin Smith.
- c. Serendipity House offers a variety of Bibles and study aids for small groups.
- d. *The Companion Guide for Lies Women Believe* by Nancy Leigh DeMoss. A valuable study for women's groups.

## Closing—Make It Your Own

I hope you will improve on these ideas. The main thing is that if you mentor and train other couples in these areas, your efforts will help them all their lives by modeling:

- Lifelong personal Bible study and devotions
- A commitment to the body of Christ; walking with others who are concerned about growth and continuing maturity all their lives
- A commitment to serve others
- A concern for those who do not know Christ

One thing I would advise you to try, is to schedule two or three service projects with the group. I'd let them suggest ideas (e.g., yard work at a widow's home, inner-city work project, inner-city church, clean up a section of roadway) and take a Saturday to do something service-oriented together. Another thought to "dream big" would be to include a one-week mission trip as a group.

As I review this process, it seems to be a large time commitment ... and it is. In 20 years of pastoring, I believe this was the most significant thing Cindy and I did. The increase in number of couples involved in ministry is more significant than so many programs we try to manage. It also is deliberately limiting for you as a leader. You cannot do everything. If you sense the same urgency I felt in trying to help young couples, this will be joyful work. You may well train the next generation of families to love Christ, walk closely together, and help others along the journey.

## Two-Year Sample Schedule

This suggested small-group weekly calendar (see chart) is divided by six segments—feel free to adjust the length of each segment according to the needs of your small group and the curriculum you choose.

## Structuring Your Meetings

A sample schedule for a two-hour meeting:

- 5:45pm** Couple who brings refreshments arrives early to set up.
- 6:00pm** Group arrives. Allow 15-20 minutes for greetings, discussion.
- 6:20pm** Begin group discussion, interaction, Scripture exercises, recitation, etc., depending on the segment you are in.
- 7:45pm** Prayer time. One technique that we find very helpful is that they must write down the precise prayer request before the session and may only read what they have written. This controls the tendency for prayer request to take so long. If there is obviously a major issue or crisis, you as the leader can open this up as needed.

	<b>Introduction</b> (one week)
16 weeks	<b>Segment One</b> <i>Basic Marriage Concepts</i>
13 weeks	<b>Segment Two</b> <i>Stewardship</i>
33 weeks	<b>Segment Three</b> <i>Personal Bible Study Skill Development</i>
24 weeks	<b>Segment Four</b> <i>Systematic Theology</i>
12 weeks	<b>Segment Five</b> <i>Marriage and Family</i>
8 weeks	<b>Segment Six</b> <i>Prepare to Launch</i>



## Additional Resources

*Lies Women Believe: And the Truth that Sets Them Free*, Nancy Leigh DeMoss

*Dr. Gary Chapman on the Marriage You've Always Wanted*, Gary Chapman

*A Couple's Guide to a Growing Marriage*, Gary Chapman

*The Seven Conflicts*, Tim and Joy Downs

*Fight Fair!*, Tim and Joy Downs

*Free and Clear: God's Roadmap to Debt-Free Living*, Howard Dayton

*The ABCs of Handling Money God's Way*, Howard and Bev Dayton

*The Total Money Makeover*, Dave Ramsey

*Larry Burkett's Money in Marriage: A Biblical Approach*, Larry Burkett and Michael E. Taylor

*Preparing for Marriage: A Complete Guide to Help You Discover God's Plan for a Lifetime of Love*, David Boehl, Brent Nelson, Jeff Schulte, and Lloyd Shadrach

*Starting Your Marriage Right*, Dennis and Barbara Rainey

*Love Life for Every Married Couple*, Dr. Ed Wheat

*Sexual Intimacy in Marriage*, Dr. William Cutrer and Sandra Glahn

*Love for a Lifetime*, James Dobson

*The Marriage Builder*, Larry Crabb

*Intimate Issues: Answers to 21 Questions Christian Women Ask About Sex*, Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus

*A Severe Mercy*, Sheldon Vanauken

*The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis

*What's Submission Got to do With it?* Cindy Easley

*Marriage: From Surviving to Thriving*, Chuck Swindoll

## Internet Resources

Five Lies The Church Tells Women • [www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/5lies.html](http://www.leaderu.com/orgs/probe/docs/5lies.html)

FamilyLife • [www.familylife.com/default.asp](http://www.familylife.com/default.asp)

FamilyLife Weekend to Remember Conference • [www.familylife.com/conferences](http://www.familylife.com/conferences)

What Every Husband Needs to Know • [www.bible.org/page.asp?page\\_id=1281](http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=1281)

What Every Wife Needs to Know • [www.bible.org/page.asp?page\\_id=1282](http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=1282)

Grow Up! • [www.bible.org/page.asp?page\\_id=1277](http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=1277)

Marriage: Intimates or Inmates? • [www.bible.org/page.asp?page\\_id=2785](http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=2785)

Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood • [www.cbmw.org](http://www.cbmw.org)

Temporarily Yours • [www.boundless.org/2001/departments/beyond\\_buddies/a0000583.html](http://www.boundless.org/2001/departments/beyond_buddies/a0000583.html)

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