

CONSULTATION ON SUSTAINING & ENRICHING MARRIAGE

THE ENCOUNTER MODEL

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1. *What is specific and unique about this particular approach to marriage enrichment? Describe briefly how it can be used within the broad context of pastoral ministry with married couples.*

The Encounter Model specifically approaches marriage enrichment through the open and vulnerable sharing of the presenter's true life experiences in a "story telling" format. Three married Catholic couples and a Catholic priest share on various aspects of intimate and responsible relationship with their spouse with the ultimate focus on helping participants to understand and live their Sacrament in and for the Church.

The Encounter approach is unique in that the focus is on supporting "good" marriages; therefore none of the couples who present the experience are trained professional counselors. There is no "classroom" style lecture, no small group sharing, and no opportunity for the participants to voice questions during a presentation. The sharing by the presenters is extremely personal, yet relatable to the experience of most married couples. It is a unique model in that no payment, other than a small registration fee, is required prior to the experience which makes it accessible to all socio-economic groups of society. It is sustained solely through free will donations offered at the conclusion of each experience. WWME is also unique in that it teaches an ongoing daily communication technique called "dialogue" to continue enriching individual and couple growth in the relationship. The Encounter Model also offers community support to live the values espoused by the presenters.

The WWME model can be used within the broad context of pastoral ministry with married couples by encouraging them to participate in the life of the parish as a **couple**, a visible sign of their Sacrament of Matrimony.

2. *What are some strengths and some limitations of this model? What beneficial outcomes are associated with it?*

One of the strengths of the Encounter Model is that it is a **peer ministry** — married couples ministering to married couples. WWME also teaches an ongoing daily dialogue method of communication which offers a tool for continuing to build trust and unconditional love between a husband and wife. An additional important strength is the involvement and support offered in Christian community to couples following WWME.

A limitation of the Encounter Model is that it generally requires the commitment of a weekend time period — Friday evening until Sunday afternoon. This is an increasingly difficult decision for married couples due to both spouses working and/or the activities their children are involved in on weekends — sports, dancing, karate, etc.

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Beneficial outcomes associated with the Encounter Model are that it often reawakens a desire within the couple to return to the practice of their Catholic faith or to become more active in their parish. It can facilitate forgiveness within the couple relationship and within the family. It promotes greater acceptance of one another by calling couples to love one another as Christ loves the Church. The Encounter Model often serves as a tool for evangelization as couples become open to incorporating the Gospel values into their daily lives. Couples are encouraged to live an open and apostolic lifestyle, sharing their love with others for the renewal of the Church.

In fact we are a good example of one of those couples that experienced a WWME Weekend and decided to get involved in the parish. Prior to our Weekend in 1977, we were periodic attendees at our parish in Upton, MA. We were not involved in any parish activities. When we came home from our Weekend, we called our pastor and asked what training we needed to get in order to qualify to teach CCD as a couple. He laughed – “you already have all the training you need, so come on down to the Rectory and we will get you set up to teach in the next semester”. From that beginning, we were CCD teachers for 15 years, Coordinators of the parish Lector and Eucharistic Minister Programs for 17 years and are now Lectors, Eucharistic Ministers, and on the Parish Council and the Liturgy Committee. And our Marriage Encounter Weekend was the catalyst that put our parish involvement in motion.

3. *In what ways has this approach evolved in response to the contemporary needs of married couples and in the light of new communications technology? What recommendations do you have for strengthening the Church’s ministry of marriage enrichment in general?*

WWME began in the United States in 1968. Since that time, the Outline and Mentality have continued to change and evolve to better meet the needs of committed married couples. WWME currently does not use new communications technology (i.e., multi-media, Powerpoint, slideshows, etc.), preferring to rely on the verbal face-to-face and heart-to-heart intimate communication so lacking in married relationships today. The Encounter Model asks couples to briefly leave behind their careers, their children, their responsibilities and obligations to focus on being **fully present** to one another — emotionally, spiritually, and physically — during the course of their time together on the weekend. This simple, yet powerful, approach has continued to strengthen Christian marriages for almost 40 years.

We believe that **personal investment** in the lives of married couples, journeying with them in their vocation of lifelong commitment to their sacrament is one of the most powerful ways to strengthen the Church’s ministry of marriage enrichment. Catholic married couples need an awareness of how vital their Sacrament of Matrimony is to the life of the Church, particularly in encouraging vocations to the priesthood. Without healthy, life-giving marriages, the Church will not have healthy, life-giving families who teach, live, and propagate our Catholic faith.

Other recommendations to strengthen the Church’s ministry to marriage are to encourage parish-based support of existing efforts to renew and enrich marriage; to publicly

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acknowledge and participate in events such as World Marriage Day to create awareness and affirmation for the vocation of marriage; and to encourage seminaries to make known to their students the various marriage ministries.