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THE LIFECYCLE STAGES OF A MARRIAGE

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A healthy lifelong marriage involves building "multiple marriages" with the same spouse. Partners invested in a marriage covenant are committed to a continuing process that has some discreet stages and many transitions that can become either destabilizing events or normative development. Change is a given in this process and ability to adapt is essential. Understanding and sustaining this "marrying process" is a vital challenge for the Church.

Practical realities impact this challenge in 2005. Because men and women now live longer than ever before, there are additional stages and processes to be faced by long-term couples in the development of their marriages. Expectations of goals and roles in the marriage continue to change in contemporary times, especially for new couples or those at significant life junctures. In measuring satisfaction with the marriage, for example, the couple relationship and personal fulfillment have become greater priorities than earlier expectations of social and economic security or stability for raising children. Dual career marriages often radically alter husband and wife roles. Divorce is a visible option for dealing with the stresses and discontents that are both common and unique across the life cycle. Disrupted families, acceptance of unwed childbearing, cohabitation and dismissive attitudes about marriage all impact future couples during the periods of remote and proximate preparation that is preliminary to marriage.

This paper will address the dynamics involved in the continuous growth process and the discreet stages in living out a lifelong marriage commitment. It will explore the change process that precipitates movement from one stage to the next and the consequent potential that exists for either break down or new growth in the marriage relationship. It will outline common stages in the marriage life cycle and discuss personal, situational and social variables that impact a maturing marriage. There is always an assumption, sometimes highlighted, that variables like class, ethnic differences, age and unique circumstances will influence sequence and some content of the stages, tasks and issues of the life cycle.

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

The Essential Dynamic: Dealing with Change

Growth and development is seldom really comfortable. Development involves change and change, even when desired, causes a certain dislocation and anxiety. Learning and growth in relationships, as in all things, requires a catalyst for change. Some seasoned individuals and couples are known, therefore, to pray, "Lord, let us skip growth this year."

Theory makes marriage development sound straightforward and even simple. Observation demonstrates that marriages engage in a process of regular and ordered change over time, over the lifecycle. This cycle has discreet stages, each of which is characterized by an interactive pattern between the two partners. This pattern is qualitatively distinct in key ways from the previous and subsequent interaction patterns. There are unique developmental tasks, like differentiating self from family of origin or forming a marital system, which must be mastered to ensure continued healthy development and to avoid handicapping future stages of growth. There are also normal tasks across the maturing life cycle like learning to forgive and trust in the face of human failure, like accepting the paradox that one is lovable and loving while also being sometimes petty and jealous. Movement from one stage to the next, from one level of maturity to a higher level, is always precipitated by transitional events (Fuller & Fincham, l994). That's when the simple part of ordered development ends.

The transitional event may be a normative crisis event like the birth of a child, a nonnormative, stressful event like a job loss or serious illness or it may be a combination or pile-up of the two. The catalyst event may be some betrayal of trust, like infidelity or deceit or it may be a personal failure, which results in lack of self-esteem or depression. All transition events produce a feeling of heightened ambiguity concerning role and rules of interaction in the relationship. Some ongoing or situational weakness in either partner (e.g. alcoholism or ill health) or some negative pattern in the overall relationship (e.g. lack of mutual respect or negative problem solving) may turn an ordinary moment of change into an overwhelming crisis (Gottman, l990; l991). The occurrence of several significant stressor events within a short period of time can force the marriage into major reorganization.

Piaget and Inhelder (l958) observed the universal process through which children learn and provided a basis for understanding what goes on during all learning, including that of couples learning how to make multiple marriages with each other over a lifetime. The learning process applied to marriage goes like this: the marriage partners have a way of being together, of thinking and feeling about their relationship. Something happens to disrupt that (e.g. they disagree about how to handle a difficult thirteen year old, one becomes caught in extended family problems, they face great success or great failure, they grow older, one betrays the other in some big or small way) and the interaction between partners must be restructured. That restructuring happens through a process of experimentation with new patterns of feeling and behaving. Normally couples hold onto some degree of familiar patterns while they experiment with change.

The experimentation often involves an attempt to have things exactly the way they felt and worked before the catalyst event. ("I want it to be as if this never happened." or "I want a black and white world in which I am never uncertain." or "Why does it have to be different just because we have a child?"). On the other hand, it can involve a reaction to everything that went on before and desire for total change. ("I'm nearly 40 and don't like my life so I need to start over from scratch." or "We've tried and tried to stay close to this child of ours and the only thing left is to admit it's hopeless and stop caring." or "The value system of our families or the church about marriage causes difficulties so lets drop it all and look someplace else.")

If the couple remembers the uncertainty or eventual success of past growth processes or has good mentors and some commitment to the process, then they are likely to walk with the ambiguity and get past the need either to avoid the reality of change or reject totally their past experience. They will give one another the patience to "live their way into the answer"(Rilke, 1984). The most positive response to a time of significant transition is for the couple to deal with both the new and the old until a pattern of interaction is achieved that is acceptable to each of the individuals involved. Successful negotiation of the "new marriage" leads to a new stage of equilibrium for the couple and high levels of relationship satisfaction. Failure to achieve a consensus about new roles and interactions may lead to decreased levels of satisfaction at a minimum and breakdowns in the relationship (Markey, l989).

The process for dealing with change described in the previous paragraphs is the foundational process for learning. Those who would help couples to cope and adapt successfully to inevitable life transitions need to understand and support those couples in navigating the process through the lifecycle stages of a marriage. Bronfenbrenner (l988) reminds us, however, that this *process* does not happen in isolation. *Process-Personal Characteristics-Context* are the trio of factors that impact how well or how poorly an individual and a couple will move successfully through the life stages and renegotiate successive marriages with each other. *Process* includes dealing with change factors and the stages and developmental tasks and issues of the lifecycle. *Personal characteristics* are unique to each partner's history, psychological characteristics and behavioral choices (e.g. levels of self esteem, family of origin messages, ability to attach to others). *Context* involves the circumstances in which the process of development at a particular lifecycle stage is taking place (e.g. facts of the living situation, messages from the cultural environment, modeling and support systems that are available). In discussion of discreet stages in the marriage life cycle, I will note some personal characteristics or context issues that may be significant or current.

From the earliest life stages through the whole of an individual's ongoing formation, institutions like the Church need to be intentionally involved in preparing couples to live and build well through the complexities (i.e. *Process-Personal Characteristics-Context)* of the developmental stages in marriage. The change process can build or it can destroy a marriage.

Stages in the Marriage Life Cycle

There is more agreement among scholars about *what goes on* at times of change in the cycle of marriage than there is about the *names and definitions* most proper for each stage of change. Clearly, individuals within a marriage develop differently because of gender, age, background, and environmental conditions. Ethnic patterns and social class have impact on the exact sequence of roles and tasks. Marriages with children have major differences from marriages without children. Remarriages have additional issues within certain developmental stages.

It is possible, however, to provide foundational categories to describe the developmental tasks and issues across a marriage life cycle. While there is overlap and interaction across these tasks and issues, it is useful to assign a descriptive title/stage to them (Carter & McGoldrick, l980; Fuller & Fincham, (l994). Ongoing research and contemporary data name additional important variables for those who will use such a framework to evaluate needs and develop long and short-range resources to help couples develop successfully. I provide a basic framework that reflects both current and foundational thinking. In the chart that follows, I lay out the stages of the marriage life cycle and their corresponding developmental tasks and issues. In the brief discussion of each marriage life cycle stage, I cite data on variables that may be useful to those designing pastoral responses.

Stages of the Marriage Life Cycle

Marriage Life Cycle Stage	Developmental Tasks and Issues
1. Childhood Experience of Marriage	a. Formation through adult modeling about relationships and marriage. b. Dealing with loss of parent through death or divorce c. Initial repeating of or reacting to learned messages from family of origin about relationships and marriage
2. Adolescent and Young Adult Experience of Male/Female Relationship	a. Integration of informal and formal education on sexuality and male and female relationships b. Formation by peers, schools, media and society on roles and values in commitment and family c. Experience of dating relationships
3. Leaving Home and Decision to Marry	a. Differentiation of self in relation to family of origin b. Development of intimate peer relationships c. Establishment of self related to work and financial independence d. Discernment about self and marriage, cohabitation
4. Being Newly Married	a. Formation of marital system b. Transitioning from single to couple life c. Realignment of relationships with extended families and friends to include spouse d. Adjustment of career decisions to married life e. Dealing with changing issues of time, sex and money
5. Building Marriage with Young Children	a. Adjusting marital system to make space for children b. Joining in childrearing, financial and household tasks c. Realignment of relationships with extended family to include parenting and grand parenting roles d. Balancing marriage and career choices with parenting
6. Refocusing Midlife Marriage with Adolescents	a. Shift of parent child relationships to permit adolescents to move in and out of system b. Refocus on midlife personal, marital and career issues c. Beginning shift toward joint caring for older generation
7. Launching Children and Moving On	a. Renegotiation of marital system as dyad b. Development of adult to adult relationships between Grown children and their parents c. Realignment of relationships to include in-laws and

grandchildren
d. Dealing with disabilities and death of older extended family

8. Shaping Later Life Marriage

a. Maintaining couple functioning/interests in face of physiological decline and financial changes
b. Renegotiate marriage partnership in retirement
c. Life review and integration

Stage 1: ***Childhood Experience of Marriage***

The earliest formation for marriage happens in the place where each of the future marriage partners grows up. This remote preparation teaches the child about what it means to be loved, nurtured and part of a family. Rules on forgiveness, acceptance, self esteem, respect, commitment, faithfulness, limits and discipline are mostly learned when the individual does not recognize that he or she is learning them.

The family of origin from which a child comes provides the models for feeling, thinking and acting that a child will tend to repeat or react to for the rest of his/her life. For example, the quality of parenting in the first years of emotional development does or does not establish for the child the key element of basic trust that the world is a good place and that he/she can manage life difficulties and challenges (Erikson,1959). Also, the ability to form an adult attachment to another person is significantly impacted by earlier experiences of perceived abandonment caused by parental illness, death or divorce. The first image of what a relationship "looks like" comes from the home environment.

"When families marry" is an apt naming of what occurs when two individuals decide to form a family together. Each partner brings to the union from their family of origin patterns and attitudes about vital issues like money, values, problem solving, children, sex, and commitment (Meis & Meis, 2002). Awareness that these patterns and attitudes are learned and can be changed allows the freedom to make adult choices rather than automatically repeating or reacting against the early messages. Such awareness and intentional choosing is important if respect, understanding and mutual adaptation is to characterize a marriage relationship.

This earliest stage in the life cycle of marriage is colored by challenges related to significant contemporary facts. The divorce rate has leveled off at a high rate and many children grow up in the environment of broken marriages. Forty percent of cohabiters have children they are raising within that cohabiting situation and these children tend to react in life like children of divorce and single parenting (Brown, 2004). The number of couples choosing to marry in the United States dropped by almost 50% between l970 and 2005 (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2005) and nearly one-third of all babies and 70% of African American children are currently born out-of-wedlock. Research by Wallerstein (2000) identifies a "crisis of trust" that occurs in children of families of divorce when they are adults in their 20's or 30's. These individuals find it difficult to trust themselves or others to be a good marriage partner or to trust that any marriage can really work. Often, Wallerstein found, children of divorce will even sabotage a good relationship because they are sure that "the second shoe will eventually fall." Elizabeth Marquardt (2005) describes painful emotional, moral and spiritual dilemmas children suffer, even if a divorce is amicable.

If the remote preparation for marriage is to be a healthy one, pastoral priority needs to be given to family formation with emphasis on the impact of current relationships on the future. Parents need to

become more intentional marriage educators for their children. Attention to formation for families with children can provide proactive and preventive service to the marriages of future generations.

Stage 2: ***Adolescent and Young Adult Experience of Male/Female Relationship***

On the Family (1981) speaks of a gradual process of conversion and preparation for marriage. The time of adolescent and early young adult experience is a long and varied time with lasting effects on the human person. Some would say that extended education and economic dependence on family of origin has moved the end of adolescence to about age twenty-six. However much time is spent in adolescence and young adulthood, *Faithful to Each Other Forever* (l987) calls this a time of *proximate preparation* for marriage.

During this life stage, the formal and informal exploration around sexuality and male and female relationships is front and center. Early attitudes and experiences about the connection between sexuality and intimacy are central to the quality of the later marital sexual relationship. The view of sexuality as a gift from God and the meaning of chastity and fidelity are central to value formation and lifelong decision-making. Sex as sacramental (Whitehead & Whitehead 2001) is an insight best planted when sex first becomes important rather that remedially at the time of marriage preparation or after an affair in marriage.

Getting the right messages on sex to young people is important and difficult. Over 14,000 sexual messages about sex are provided each year from television alone (Meeker, 2002). They tell kids "if you're not having sex, something's wrong with you." Half of all students in 9th through 12th grade have had sex and most teens don't consider oral sex, or anything other than intercourse, as being "real" sex. (Meeker, 2002). Bumpass and Lu (2000) note that those who have had sex in high school are much more likely to cohabit before marriage than those who did not. Erikson (l959) describes adolescence as the time to choose between forming a coherent identity or falling prey to a sense of despair and confusion. Adolescents often receive conflicting messages from society, peers and even parents about sexuality, about femininity and masculinity, about the treatment of males and females (Pollack, 1998; Pipher l994).

Preparing parents to educate and form their children with healthy views on sexuality is essential. While it is very important that schools do good sexuality education, it is more important that parents not leave this to the schools. Fathers and mothers need to understand the unique dangers and challenges to youth today and learn to be informed, positive and irreplaceable guides for them. Pastoral approaches need to empower parents in this area (Josephson, Peter, &Dowd, 2002).

A challenge that has become more pressing in recent times relates to positive formation for adolescents and young adults on commitment and an openness to marry. This is a time when individuals begin to date and move to look, at least preliminarily, at potential long-term partners. Marriage, however, is increasingly being presented by the culture as an unnecessary and difficult option. Commitment, especially lifelong commitment, is presented or modeled as undesirable and probably impossible (Stanley, Whitton & Markman, 2004). Positive facts and attitudes about marriage need to be identified and espoused (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Institute for American Values (2002). Strong counter-cultural messages need to be made available to those proceeding through this proximate state of marriage.

Secondary school and early young adulthood appears to be the time when individuals are most interested in forming identity and relatedness, two characteristics essential for healthy marriage.

Getting It Right (Center for Marriage and Family, 1995), a nation-wide study on the value of marriage preparation in the Catholic Church, indicated that individuals who had received secondary school religious education responded significantly better to preparation programs before marriage than those with no secondary school religious education. They found more long-range value in it than other groups. Personal identity and relatedness to God, to self and to others are common basic themes at this level of religious formation. This is probably the most effective stage to share research and insights about the impact of cohabitation and to promote a positive approach to marriage as a vocation in life.

Stage 3: ***Leaving Home and Decision to Marry***

In earlier periods, late adolescence or young adulthood would ordinarily be synonymous with leaving home and would be closely related to the decision to marry. In contemporary times, however, adolescence can extend into the early 20's. Many young people return home after initial education in order to save money while they establish themselves in careers or further education. The median age for marrying in 2005 is over twenty-seven for men and twenty-six for women. Entering a first marriage between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five is very common. It seems realistic, then, to recognize older young adults as having tasks distinct from adolescents and those in early young adulthood. This older group has really left home and is now ready to establish more emotional and financial responsibilities for themselves. They are ready to consider permanent relationships. There are, of course, many overlaps between Stages 2 and 3 in this framework.

This new second stage of proximate preparation for marriage requires that the young adult separate from the family of origin while avoiding cutting off extended family or fleeing reactively to some substitute refuge (e.g. cohabitation, cult-like communities). This is the time for the individual to formulate realistic life goals and become a "self" before choosing another to join with to form a new family. This is the time to sort out emotionally what they will take along from the family of origin and what they will leave behind and what they will create for themselves (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980). Continuous with this "becoming self", the young adult chooses a lifestyle, a career direction and begins to make significant adult friends, sometimes bringing along those from earlier stages and sometimes not.

In this most important time of self-determination, mature young adults make decisions based on values and beliefs that may have been going through change, periods of questioning and experimentation. It is a natural adult conversion moment in terms of the faith values with which they will live out most of their marriage life cycle. Unfortunately, this older, young adult period most often coincides with a vacuum of explicit outreach and formation by the Church or this group is ministered to in the same way as those in the late adolescent, early young adult period. Sometimes this period of older adulthood coincides with formal marriage preparation, which can serve as the time of spiritual reconnection or deepening. Often, however, it is a neglected moment in the life cycle for adult faith and sacramental marriage development.

In the life cycle stages of marriage, this is the ordinary time when individuals decide if they will marry or not and who they will marry. Cohabitation presents itself as a temporary or permanent alternative to marriage. It may already have become part of the early young adult life as a replacement for dating. Two questions impact these individuals: Is marriage something they seek for themselves? If they have cohabited, what risks to marriage have they created for themselves?

As has been noted before in this paper, marriage is under significant attack, although 93% of Americans still say they hope to form and lasting and happy union with one person but fewer believe

that this is possible. A 1995 college textbook challenges this view with its statement that "Marriage has an adverse effect on women's mental health" (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

In the young adult stage of deciding to marry, individuals and couples need positive input from earlier life messages and from their families, church and culture on the meaning and value of marriage today. Waite and Gallagher make their case for marriage by giving data on "Why Married People are Happier, Healthier and Better Off Financially" (2000). Many couples have to weigh this against family and friends who are divorced and against the option to live singly, with or without cohabitation. Bumpass (l995) frames the cultural question about the relevance of marriage. He provides data indicating that, in the United States, marriage is no longer the standard starting point for having an ongoing sexual relationship, for having a child or having a home together. The decision to begin the lifecycle stages of marriage is a choice for today's young adult in the face of other popular options. Those who choose to marry have, to some degree, made a countercultural decision.

From 50% to 80% of couples presenting themselves for marriage preparation in U.S. parishes today are cohabiting. All data indicates that couples that cohabit before marriage have generally a higher divorce rate than those who do not (Smock, Manning & Porter, 2005). They come to marriage with risk factors that arise from the cohabitation process itself (e.g. more conflict over money, poor habits of conflict resolution, higher domestic violence rates) and from the selection factors that led them to cohabit in the first place (e.g. belief that they can work out all problems before marriage, concerns about long-term commitment, fear that either partner is not good "marriage material").

Cohabiters coming for marriage are, however, a very diverse group and there is indication that some of them may be less at risk than others. For example, while a high percentage of couples report plans to marry, a smaller percentage actually do. For those cohabiting couples who are committed to marriage with each other from the beginning, neither has had any other sexual partner, neither has a previous cohabitation, there is a divorce rate only slightly higher than those who do not cohabit before marriage. This profile, however, involves less than 30% of cohabiting couples (Teachman, 2003). All cohabiters who marry need preparation that is sensitive to their possible risk factors and avoids the creation of "self-fulfilling prophecies" about future failure.

All couples require a marriage preparation which attends to and integrates the earlier remote and proximate periods of their "marrying process." Immediate preparation is a key time to prepare them for the overall process of lifelong change and commitment, which will allow them to expect and meet the challenges of the future stages of marriage.

Stage 4: *Being Newly Married*

National divorce statistics indicate that most divorces occur in couples married less than five years and that the proportion of divorces is highest for couples married three years (Kreider, 2005; Kurdek, l999). Clearly, the developmental tasks and issues for couples in this stage of the marriage cycle are challenging. The major developmental tasks do not come in single file and the stresses and points may pile-up on one another. Becoming a couple is indeed one of the most complex and difficult transitions of the marital life cycle; however, it is usually romanticized to be the easiest and most joyous.

Forming a marital system requires that a couple renegotiate together multiple personal issues they have previously defined for themselves or were defined differently in each of their families. While each individual may have made adult decisions about how to deal in work or with adult

acquaintance around certain issues (e.g. money, space, time, problem-solving or expressions of feelings when sick or sad), when they walk through a doorway called "home", a whole different set of expectations come through about "how it should be", how the other should respond, how they are allowed to act. The catalyst for growth is the discomfort each feels with these differences. This discomfort requires a restructuring of the relationship based on the recognition that past needs and patterns connect to the present but that, mutually, they must negotiate a present way of dealing with things that is acceptable to both.

The same process is required in the realignment of relationships with extended families and friends so that the marriage system is a priority. In integrating careers changes, the new questions are "How will *we* make the decision and how will it impact the marriage?" In deciding to marry, the decision is made to become a couple and not remain single. Day-to-day choices will spell out the implications of being a couple, not two singles.

The 2000 research on newly marrieds by the Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University identified time, sex and money as primary issues causing stress in the new marital system. Couples reported that they did not have enough *time* for the relationship because they were consumed by careers, social obligations and children. *Sex* was often not sufficient or satisfying because of lack of time and energy. *Money* was generally an ongoing source of disagreement or stress. Good conflict resolutions skills around these and other stressors is the greatest predictor of satisfaction in the early marriage.

If the newly married are to build well for the future stages of their marriage, the changes presented in early key stage need to result in renegotiation for a special kind of togetherness, an "intimacy with each other's autonomy" (Wallerstein, 1995). This interdependence allows good conflict resolution and includes a balance of positive and negative interactions (Gottman, l994). Poorly managed transitions in these times of normative crisis can result in issues ignored (and festering) or destructive patterns and attitudes. Well-managed restructuring of the relationship forms the foundation for healthy movement to new stages and issues.

Immediate marriage preparation and ongoing education and available support systems can help newly married have appropriate expectations about all the developmental tasks facing them in the newly married stage. The inexperience and infatuation of those choosing marriage can lead them to expect that all will be simple and easy. The intent of many cohabiting couples is to work out all issues before marriage and, so, these couples experience even more dissatisfaction than other couples when they have struggles (Brown, 2000).

Stage 5: *Building Marriage with Young Children*

Shifting to the stage of raising children requires that a couple moves up a generation and become caretakers of the younger generation while continuing to build the strength of the marriage relationship. The most stable center in family for a child is two parents who find satisfaction in their marriage. In balancing the system to include children, the couple has to renegotiate financial, household and childrearing tasks. They have to realign relationships with extended family to include parenting and grand parenting tasks with both families of origin. In dual career marriages, both parents have to balance marriage and career choices with parenting. The marriage matures significantly during

this time or, if not, major weaknesses in transitioning from one set of tasks to another can cause breaks and disengagement in the marriage.

The multiple adjustments to be negotiated in the relationship help explain why the marriage satisfaction rate drops significantly for parents with young children (Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003). Having children both centers the marriage and changes the overall quality of the marriage. Couples spend much time and energy with the young children and have less time together as a couple. They often do not have time and energy for sexual affection and they have much more to argue about. The second highest peak in the divorce rate occurs after seven years of marriage (Kurdek, l999) when a couple who has not strengthened their bond together may start re-examining their marriages choice and wondering about what else is out there. Patterns of "time out" for parents and options for childcare need to be negotiated by the couple or provided by the extended system in order to give the couple quality time to attend to their marriage.

In general, the contemporary culture is less supportive and understanding of the family with children than at earlier times. In l973-l976 period, 51% of children under the age of eighteen were living with married adults in a marriage the reporting spouse rated as "very happy." By the l997- 2002 period, that percentage had dropped to 37%. Whitehead and Popenoe (2005) describe a significant "loss of child centeredness" in America. They point out that since 2000, the overall birth rate has been continuously downward while the percentage of the children born outside marriage has gone up. Americans increasingly view marriage and child rearing as separate pursuits. In contrast to these changes in attitude, scholars are widely in agreement that the best family situation for children and adolescents is to live with married parents who have a good marriage.

A major factor within this stage in the marriage cycle, and indeed in ever getting into the marriage cycle, is economic security (Smock, 2004). Individuals who are economically well off are more likely to marry, have children and stay married. This is especially true of minority families. Oropesa and Landale (2004) suggest that retreat from marriage among Hispanics is likely to continue because of limited economic opportunities, despite the promarriage cultural orientation of Hispanic groups. Also young white and African American men and women perceive precarious economic circumstances as a key barrier to marriage and many disadvantaged parents will not consider marriage until they have a decent income and some assets (Cherlin, 2004).

Both long-term and immediate attitudes and issues need attention from religious and social institutions if marriages with children are to be built well in our society. The Healthy Marriage Initiative developed by the Federal Administration for Children and Families is addressing many of these issues for low-income and disadvantaged families. Church organizations and ministries are increasingly involved in this effort. In this new endeavor, it has become increasingly clear that most resources and approaches on marriage, family and parenting within the Church have been designed for middle income families and need to be significantly adapted or newly designed for low-income, educationally challenged populations.

Stage 6: ***Refocusing Midlife Marriage with Adolescent***

The "pile up" of developmental tasks occurs in this stage of the marriage cycle when both adolescent children and midlife parents face major reorganization issues at the same time. Within the marriage cycle, the previous stage put the developmental energies of the couple into the establishment of a stable family life balanced with career development. By midlife, the tasks involve an evaluation of achievements and a dealing with the disillusionments within the marriage and family while revising

dreams and expectations. Midlife marriages often include adolescents or almost young adults whose own developmental cycle requires independence and separation along with parental guidance and appropriate limits. All this change within the system presents major challenges for the marriage relationship.

In myth and fact, the midlife stage can be a time of sea-change for the couple relationship. Everything appears to be changing. Relationships with children must shift to meet their growth needs. There may be preoccupation that earlier parenting decisions may have harmed children. Simultaneously, a relationship with the senior generation is changing. The marriage partners become "the sandwich generation" who must provide more for both their adolescent children and their parents who may have become emotionally, physically or financially needy.

Each partner in the marriage may deal differently with these developments. As they see personal options being limited by age and earlier life decisions, one may experience more acutely the chagrin of looking older and facing athletic limits; the other may be much more concerned about the sense of the hourglass of opportunities running out. Often, couples experience a lack of synchronicity. As a result, they can choose to renegotiate how they relate and can start to move closer in ways that were not possible before or, conversely, ignore or react to what is happening and create a great amount of emotional distance between them. The midlife time can begin a painful period during which dormant marital issues, often freighted with sexual resentment, can intensify suddenly. On the other hand, a far greater degree of emotional honesty becomes possible for many couples (Scarf, l992).

The necessary restructuring of the relationship at this time often involves experimentation with feelings, roles and decision-making. It is during this period that couples or those around them may recognize the need for help in refocusing the relationship, sometimes with counseling or experiential education on healthy relationship growth. To meet this need, some structured programs or approaches are available to aid in the general developmental process (e.g. "10 great dates to energize your relationship" (Arp & Arp, l997); REFOCCUS (Markey, Micheletto, & Baker, 1989); Marriage Encounter.) RETROUVAILLE is an intense weekend with follow-up for seriously disrupted marriages and comes out of Catholic tradition.

More such approaches than are presently available to most couples need to be developed and fostered. Pastoral concerns exist around providing such help. Often marital and family counseling services are not available to couples at affordable costs and many of the counseling services available are not value-based to promote healthy development. Often, the available services are directed only to situational problem-solving and do not acknowledge or integrate a developmental process approach. Some are really designed to bring about a "healthy divorce" rather than reorganization and reconnection in the marriage. Church agencies in many places have dropped their marriage counseling services unless these are connected to addictions or other conditions that receive funding from government or other outside sources.

Another problem reality in providing service to needs at this stage is that some existing programs (e.g. Marriage Encounter) are experiencing great fall off in use. Professional and pastoral energies need to be directed to examine factors involved in this decline in usage (i.e. length of program, processes, content, and marketing to new populations.

Stage 7: *Launching Children and Moving On*

This phase of the marital life cycle is the newest and the longest. David and Claudia Arp (2000) call it the second half of marriage. Until a generation ago, most married couples were occupied with raising their children for their entire active adult lives until they were near old age. Now, because of the low birth rate and the long life span of most adults, couples launch their children almost 20 years before retirement and must then find other life activities.

It is during this period that observers are noting an increase in marriage breakups. Couples are sometimes not prepared or motivated to renegotiate the relationship in terms of the major task of this phase: to form an adult, mature relationship of just two people. Some are blindsided by this. What are the models? What preparations have them made over earlier cycles for this?

Both partners are often at the most productive times in their careers and they have energy and sometimes fewer financial burdens with children educated and out of the home. Sometimes, there are resources and desire for a full-time mother to complete an interrupted education or begin a new career. What couples don't have is the motivation or "roadmap" for marital reorganization. Sometimes there is past resentment in the way: "You want intimacy now, but where were you all those years when your career came ahead of me and I learned how to get along well without being close to you." Or there is fatigue: "There have been too many scars and too many failures. I just want to be left alone or to start over with a blank slate."

For many couples, there is the excitement of a new time together. Others choose to move beyond the past and to trust in a building a "new marriage" that owns the light and shadow of the past. Some just endure and never really connect. The culture and the church community need to be creatively attentive to the lack of models or past patterns for couples entering this phase.

Children are still a part of the growth processes that couples need to achieve during this stage of change. They need to develop adult relationships with their children. Accomplishing this task can make the marital process seem more challenging. The difficulties of facing life alone with each other can lead one or both partners to hold on to their children inappropriately or can lead to feeling of emptiness and depression, particularly for women who have focused their main energies on the children and may feel unprepared to face a new career of any kind (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980)

Most significantly, this phase ordinarily has the greatest number of exits and entries of family members. Grown children are launched and then their spouses, in-laws and children enter the picture and become part of a crowded family scene. On the other hand, with couples marrying later and delaying having children, the parent couple may become frustrated at not having the expected entry of new members. Sometimes the grown children make the parent's home a "cluttered nest" instead of an "empty nest" by coming back over and over into the home. Differences or disagreements between the couple around response to these changes can cause stress.

This is also the period when the parents and older extended family may become ill and die. In dealing with grief and with becoming the "oldest generation", both the individuals and the relationship must deal with new emotional and role issues. Sometimes major new financial obligations and care giving for ailing and needy parents are assumed and the couple must integrate these realities into their relationship and how it operates.

Current couples are writing as they go the "book" on how to succeed in this new and extended phase in the marital relationship. There is great possibility and unique challenge in this new period.

Stage 8: ***Shaping Later Life Marriage***

People live longer today. Some of those people are the partners in a marriage that has survived and built, perhaps unevenly, over the extended life cycle. Paraphrasing a creative wordsmith, "The only thing worse than having an aging spouse is not having an aging spouse" (Pipher, l999).

The major developmental task in this final stage of the marriage life cycle is to maintain and, hopefully, build couple functioning and interest in the face of physiological decline and financial change. The first catalyst for such restructuring is often retirement; the second catalyst (which may follow years after retirement or sometimes precede it) is decline in health and physical or mental abilities. Across the years or decades that this period lasts, an issue for the relationship is the couple review and integration of what their lives together have been. There are myriad ways each unique couple will rejoice in and grieve over what has been and what has not been, but the process helps to create the final "marriage" they can build together.

Because of growing life expectancy, the number of marriages in which both partners live into later life is increasing. It is estimated that by 2025, those over 65 in the United States will increase by more than 100%. Those reaching age 65 today have an average remaining life expectancy of l7.4 years. Those reaching age 75 have an expectancy of another 11.1 years and those reaching the age of 85 can expect another 6.2 years (Koenig & Weaver, l998). So, more couples have the opportunity to face the challenges of this lifecycle stage than ever before. The increasing number of elder programs across the country and the activities of the AARP and like groups can prepare and resource couples for this stage. The question may be asked if the parish has a strong and welcoming place for these couples and recognizes their unique gifts and needs.

Not every couple in every situation has the same options or desires during this stage of the life cycle. Unhappiness and dissatisfaction with the marriage at this time are often related to the limitations of old age, low income, poor health and a lack of satisfaction with life in general and marriage and particular. There is some evidence that men and women may differ significantly in how they respond to these variables.

Economic factors create a most significant factor during this period. Most couples' income declines after retirement, sometimes substantially. This puts many elderly couples below the poverty line. Later-life minority couples are more likely than other to live in poverty. People on fixed incomes have to plan differently and make new decisions and choices. This often means problem-solving other variable under some degree of stress.

The impact of retirement and movement into old age is also a function of each partner's adjustment to the changes involved. A common cliché about retirement is that the at-home wife says to her husband, "I married you for better or for worse, but not for lunch together!" She is often dissatisfied with him being at home because he is at loose ends, doesn't what to do with himself and gets into her space and roles. He needs to sculpt a new role for himself. The added factor for many couples at this stage may be the dual career marriage that brings two retirements that are often not synchronized. Men worry that the super busy woman from work may become the nagging partner when neither spends time away at work. She fears that they will both be bored and restless with the new situation. Restructuring of the relationship is inevitable. It can open couples up to a wide range of new options or drive them into growing estrangement and discontent.

Health problems can also influence the impact of the later years. One partner may become the caregiver for the other. One husband reported "I felt myself called to a level of fidelity I have never

experienced before" when he regularly needed to take his wife in a wheel chair and special van to doctor's appointments (Fisher, l998). Grieving over lost health can be a slow constant in the final years of a relationship or the "long dying" of a partner with Alzheimer's. Ministry to aging families needs to recognize the variety of needs and issues couples have as more and more of them face the challenges and the opportunities of this last life cycle stage.

Conclusion

If the Church in the United States has as a goal the promoting and sustaining of marriage as a community of life and love, its plan of action needs to be built on understanding what such marriages require. One key foundation is knowledge of the lifecycle stages of a marriage.

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