**Virtual Team Report to NAR Board July 2023**

At the May meeting the Virtual Development Team was asked to respond to some questions designed to help direct how the group can move forward in the months ahead. Great meeting conversation, prayerful written responses and reflective processing has led to this report for the July 2023 NAR board meeting.

**First section** of this report is the summary of the conversation responding to those development questions taken from the Virtual Development Team May meeting notes:

“We want to thank everyone who participated in the virtual development team. As a team our travels have allowed us to develop and improve a virtual option for LME.  We also have developed friendships.  Now, we are searching to discover the Spirit’s direction for LME and how virtual events fit into the LME future, discern what development is needed from our team and stay unified with the greater organization. Reflective conversation led us to conclude, ‘There is a reason God has not let our hearts grow cold and we continue to serve faithfully in the marriage encounter mission.’ We shared some thoughts and feelings at the meeting and then asked the team members to think and pray more and put their responses in writing.to the following questions:

***What do you see for the future of LME, the Virtual Events, your service in the ministry?***

To help with their reflection, we included a summary of where the group is at currently:

Virtual events model developed, presented and improved over time within a small team doing multiple tasks and jobs required to host an event.  This is taking a growing amount of commitment, effort and time.  Adaptation to virtual events by other presenting groups or couples wanting to present in this format is slow in coming.

Job descriptions and event processes developed and ready to deploy – readiness of the event is complete to pass off to the greater organization.  How the ministry (LME NAR) wants to strategically use virtual events and what resources are still available within the ministry to conduct events are unknown.

Our LME ministry currently consists of enabling resources such as finance and marketing and about a half dozen small presenter groups putting on events across the North America Region, including parts of Canada.

This feedback will be used as our Virtual Developments Team report for the NAR Board at its in-person meeting in July. We will also use your responses to help shape our future meetings as needed based on how the Spirit is continuing to lead us in this LME ministry.

Thesummary of written responses to the questions above, made by members of the team, are added to the end of this report in the third section.

**The second section** of the report is about **“Moving Forward.”** Currently, we are able to conduct a few virtual events per year using the MN team of presenters and a District Host/tech couple.  We are also able to welcome anyone else in the organization to join us as we hold these events.  Currently, we think further development is not the best use of our declining resources within LME.  Getting too far out in front of the rest of the LME organization/development teams will most likely be counterproductive and require future rework.

At this point in our development, we need to build out working with the current enabling functions, identify and build out other enabling needs that can be shared resources and build the necessary tools and processes to help streamline the process of holding a Virtual Event.

Moreover, as NAR leadership determines the changes in the organizational chart, decision matrix, use of resources and defining our future direction, we will be able to build into the Virtual Events the processes that will be unified to the work and forward progress of the LME NAR organization’s other Development Teams.

Our specific work of preparing to offer a Virtual LME Event started within the Minnesota Area just over four years ago. Fortunately, our team started meeting more regularly in 2019 and putting together a strategic and operational plan to guide us and hold our commitment. God must have been guiding our efforts as this plan and the direction it provided allowed us to pivot during the pandemic and turn our efforts toward a Virtual Event Offering.

We have both our 2020 Ministry Plan Draft and Ministry Map we can provide for you so you can see the plan write-up, much of what was implemented for the virtual offering.  Since then, it has transitioned into much more than that.  We have learned much…many times through struggles.  We would hope as the NAR development teams begin treading new territory, the learning and struggles we have worked through could be shared and not repeated.  We would also welcome any learning we could obtain from other teams, especially as these other teams also hit times of struggle.  We certainly know we have many threats and weaknesses that we must manage and lead through in God’s mission field of ME.  We believe God has given us the power to change weaknesses into strengths as we listen to the Spirit's leading.  That said, we always must remember that we have many strengths and opportunities to draw success off of.

Our second biggest strength is how couples respond and get value from attending an event; their intimacy and love grows with each other and God.  Our biggest strength is the grace of God and that He created and seeks to bless marriage. As we think about the Parables that Jesus taught, each parable is really not about what we can do, but what God can do through His grace. Remembering the Parable of the Sower of the Seeds, let’s do the sowing we are called to do and have the trust and belief God will direct our seeds to land on good soil.

**The third section** of the report includes key points made to the answer of the survey questions. Those responding included Ted and Marty Hartman, Dave and Linda Pedersen, Kelli and Dan Pederson, Carl and Dallas Presley, Mick and Sandy Preston, Paul and Deb Roberts and Claudia and Richard Steele. The full responses are available on request.

“We certainly wish to thank those of you who shared your response to the question about how “there is a reason God has not let our hearts grow cold and we continue to serve faithfully in the marriage encounter mission,” said Paul and Deb. **“What do you see for the future of LME, the virtual events, your service in this ministry?**  We found the sharing to be deep, from your heart and covered not only hopes, but also concerns. We thank you and are so very grateful for the responses!”

It has been a blessing to have contributions from our NAR execs, the Hartman’s and Preston’s, on the virtual team. They joined together in their response to the questions and summed up the feelings of many.

“It sounds like people are feeling discouraged because only small groups of the same people are doing multiple jobs with no apparent interest from others to join in.  That is so true and seems to be the new era of all of Marriage Encounter.  Gone are the “good old days” when we had so many people helping that Areas could assign “Loving Tasks” to individual couples and “ta-da” a Weekend would happen.

“We experience the attrition of involved couples at all levels at this point. To that end, we think everyone is doing their best to be creative and forward-thinking in their roles in LME ministry. Each of the NAR Development Teams is treading new territory, as we have never had unified efforts to accomplish these tasks in LME. We stay the course, plant the seeds and keep persistent.”

Most everyone commented on the importance and benefits of this marriage ministry. Carl and Dallas also collaborated to make a unified response to the questions.

“We don’t know what the future holds for LME, but we believe in the vision and mission of the ministry. **VISION:** The Lutheran Church renewed and our world changed through strengthened couple relationships and stronger personal relationships with Christ. **MISSION:**  Lutheran Marriage Encounter is a ministry dedicated to assisting married couples to live fully intimate and responsible relationships by providing an Encounter Weekend experience as well as ongoing community support.

“A well-conceived vision is never easy to realize and we can be sure of stumbles, errors and frustrations along the way,” adds Carl and Dallas. “We have experienced them all, but we have also experienced successes.  It has given deep meaning to us to literally see the world changed through Marriage Encounter. Our hearts do not grow cold.”

Linda also has a positive view of LME’s future. “The Virtual Development Team has provided me with a sense of excitement and hope for LME, especially as the covid pandemic made it unsafe to offer in-person events. I was also hopeful a Virtual offering would allow presenters to keep presenting, even if there was not an opportunity in their geographical area. Excitement continued as the Virtual Development Team was joined by presenting couples from all three districts.”

Kelli adds, “The reason my heart has not grown cold to the LME ministry is that I see what it does for the couples involved –the couples being encountered, the presenting team and those others who serve this ministry.”

Dan suggests maybe it's time for each remaining presenting and community couple to step back very intentionally and have a very honest look at our beloved ministry.  “When I do that, I see an amazing product in our encounter experiences. Time and time again couples are transformed.  Countless couples have learned how to invite God into their marriages. The product is so good that even when we are not physically present (Virtual) with each other, it still works!  The content and method have stood the test of time.”

Richard said as a presenter he would not like to see LME disappear for any reason. “We need to stick together as much as possible to promote virtual. The Northeast presenters are willing to do virtual.  We have done one and a mixture of virtual and in-person.  It worked. Claudia and I are in it for the long haul.  We believe in ME.  We don't know where we would be today if we hadn't gone on that first weekend.”

Just like in relationships, this ministry can involve disillusionment, which is seen in the responses.

“Admittedly, we (Dan and Kelli), are also stretched and tired, but at the same time we really don’t want to give up. We would like to present weekends (and host / tech occasionally).  We would like to see LME thrive, but with where things are right now, I am not excited about LME because I just don’t see us evolving and positioning for the future.”

For Dave, after spending much energy at working to develop and expand the virtual option of presenting LME events, involving many meetings and adaptation to the common expression, the optimism has fallen off.

“I am telling myself it is ok to cruise at a lower speed in order to keep our motors running and ministry functioning. Then maybe there will be clarity of how to get more couples attending events and more involved in community support. A big concern is that we have exhausted our close local contacts. After personal asks and good PR at local congregations and clergy groups, there was not one couple or clergy who even asked questions when in the same room. Nor did anyone register.”

Linda also experienced a downward spiral with the ministry. “Lots of energy went into getting ready to present the LME outline in a virtual format and working out the details of tech and community support for this new opportunity. This included finding prayer couples and the impact of having couples attend from three different time zones.

“Before long it became apparent there were fewer and fewer ME couples interested in presenting or continuing to be involved in LME through other ways of support like inviting,” adds Linda. “WE learned that both virtual and in-person events were primarily the responsibility of the presenting team. The hope of igniting a renewal of the LME community looked dimmer than I had thought going into the Virtual effort.”

Dan adds, “Taking a look at our ministry from 30,000 feet it is clear to me that it is slowly dying and has been for a long time.  I want to be wrong about that statement, and let me be clear that I am in no way predicting the demise of this ministry. But just as our marriages can enter a downward spiral of disillusion, so can our ministry enter a slow death spiral. The big question is, what are we going to do about it?”

Paul and Deb recalled the days when they first joined the ministry, most of the major metropolitan areas, and some micropolitan areas, had local teams conducting events. “Now we have maybe a handful of areas conducting events and our ability to reach most of North America is very limited.  Moreover, our resources, particularly human resources within the ministry are very limited and as such our organization continues to face obstacles that were not present when we joined the ministry 25 years ago.”

Despite disillusion, frustration and uncertainty for the future expressed, there is optimism and desire to move forward.

Carl and Dallas said, “Virtual events in LME are still in their infancy. There has been enough success to see that this avenue of reaching out to couples has merit and should be further developed.  While we continue to believe that in-person events more deeply engage couples during an experience, there are proven successes with virtual.  They have reached couples who otherwise are unlikely to attend an ME Experience for a number of reasons, both personal and practical.  They are another tool that offers a viable way to fulfill our mission.”

Carl and Dallas add, “The future needs to continue to focus on developing more presenters and support role couples for this avenue of the ministry as well as broadening the publicity for virtual events, especially in geographies that are currently untouched by what Marriage Encounter has to offer.”

Dave suggests the future will depend on spreading the word. “As for me, I know there is much to do in updating our E-Blast offered by NAR. We need others helping with the time-consuming project, I know I am not inclined to take it on myself. I am hoping the marketing team can initiate more publicity covering more than just our Lutheran churches, but the greater marriage community.”

For LME in general, Linda has a sense that we may want to follow the lead of the Guthrie’s (Ted and Jane) and our neighbors to the north in Canada in practicing a more Ecumenical approach to ME. “This means hosting more events together and sharing in our efforts to develop and support couples who have been encountered,” says Linda.

As for future needs, Kelli has a sense of our organization’s hesitancy to change, and yet the world is changing quickly around us.  “I fear that if we don’t shift from the way we have always done things, this organization will die.  We need vision, ideas we can act on, energy to act on those ideas and communication across the districts to best help each other.”

Claudia adds, “Marriage is ordained by God. I believe that the time has come for us (those that believe in marriage being between one man and one woman) to come out of the shadows.  Christianity is being attacked more today than any time in the history of our country. We need to think creatively on how to promote, conduct and retain those involved in this ministry.”

Kelli proclaims that the virtual option of encountering couples works! “We welcome and encourage others to present with us on our virtual weekends. I think the thought of editing talks is off-putting for many – more pushing the rock up the hill – but the changes are small and the rewards are GREAT!  The more folks willing to help with the virtual experience, the more events we can host. The more events we can host, the more couples we can encounter.  Isn’t that the goal?”

In their long service in this ministry, Carl and Dallas have reached their 80s. “We continued to present long after other contemporary presenters considered themselves “aged-out.” This in large part is because of a couple who approached us at the end of a weekend to say that they had both been raised in broken homes and were determined not to experience in their own marriage what they had seen growing up. They shared that it was inspiring to see couples our age still expressing love for each other, struggling at times, but using the tools they had been given that weekend.

“We do believe at this point, however, that younger couples better relate to the current-day pressures of children, work, social and economic realities as presented by younger couples,” says Carl and Dallas. “Maybe we can offer hope that couples can come through these challenges, but current-day challenges are different for us and perhaps unrelatable.  As stated at the outset, we still believe in the vision and mission of LME and what it has to offer couples. We have experience to offer and dedication to the ministry – we offer as we are able where there are needs.”

To conclude Paul and Deb have some thoughts about how LME can have a successful future.

“We think we need to change and embrace more of the opportunities. We also need to continually ask God to lead us and be the force of change, wisdom and strength.  When we think about listening to those like Chan and Midge Pauling that were building the LME ministry in the early years in the late 70’s, their task was immense.  They and many others gave so much to the ministry. Their efforts were necessary for the organization to grow and thrive.

“They received help from the Catholic expression of ME as well,” continues Paul and Deb. “We think our path forward today might entail more effort and “God’s Grace” than what the ministry faced in the late 70’s.  Are we hopeful?  Very much so when we trust that God is in this and leading us. We are also leery, impatient and feel disappointment and disillusionment.  We hope to see a future Marriage Encounter community that is vibrant when our grandchildren are facing disillusionment in their marriages! Moreover, we hope they are afforded the opportunity to learn to live in intimacy with their spouses and with God and have the marriage we have all benefited from. We pray and hope our ministry still has time to revive and thrive.”

Floating on the grace of God, submitted by Paul and Deb Roberts, Dave and Linda Pedersen