

**MARRIAGE AS COVENANT -- 38.5 Min.****OBJECTIVE:**

To help the participants come to an understanding of their relationship as covenant and what that means for the Church.

**GENERAL FORMAT:**

**To know:** that marriage is a visible sign of God's love; that the couple is the heart of the "little church;" that there are gifts that flow from marriage as covenant.

**To do:** write a love letter that reflects their unconditional love for each other.

**To experience:** rekindling their hopes and dreams for their marriage; being lifted up by the love they have for each other; their spouse as a gift they should not take for granted.

**I. Introduction (LW: 0.5 min.)**

**"The title of this presentation is 'Marriage as Covenant.' The key concept is that marriage is a visible sign of God's love. Please turn to page 47 in your workbook. In the presentation last night, you got in touch with the value of dialogue this far on the weekend and were invited to use it daily. Now we will be taking a look at marriage as a covenant and what that means for the Church."**

*If desired, introduction may be preceded by a brief morning prayer, given by CL or LW.*

**II. Our wedding day (LH & LW: 3 min. total)**

*Husband and wife should both share on A, then divide B between them.*

**A. Our dream when we got married****1. Which qualities made my spouse special?**

*What were the qualities you most admired in your spouse? What did you appreciate most about him/her that day.*

**2. What were my hopes and dreams for our life together?**

*Recapture the hopes and dreams you had for your marriage. What was going on in your heart? The dream was possible because you met.*

**B. Our wedding in the Church****1. The focus of our wedding (ceremony, reception, photos, etc.)**

*Share how the focus was mostly on the ceremony, the pictures, the reception line, and the party that followed. This will support what you share in B.3 to show that at the time of your wedding you did not fully realize the meaning of your marriage as covenant. Answer the questions in light of this fact.*

**2. Why did I/we decide to get married in the Church?**

*If you were not married in the Church, explain why.*

**3. At that time, what did the Marriage Covenant mean to me?****4. How did I see the role of the pastor at our wedding?****III. A covenant love -- the kind of love we need (7 min. total)****A. Contract-type of love relationship vs. covenant-type relationship**

*(5 min. total)*

**1. Explain what a Marriage Covenant is. End with a statement that marriage as covenant is holy and important to the Church.**

*(CL)*

*Begin this section with an explanation of the Biblical basis for a covenant. Use your own words here. Prior to the coming of Christ, God made many covenants with His people -- with Noah, in which God promised never again to destroy the world by a flood; with Abraham, in which God promised to be the Father of many nations; with the chosen people on Mt. Sinai, in which God promised that they would always be God's special people. With the coming of Christ, all these covenants and more are renewed and made even more perfect through Christ's redemptive death, the gift of communion, the founding of the church, and so forth.*

*In all of these covenants, God takes the initiative, and there is never a question of equity between what is promised and what is expected of the beneficiary. What God promises far surpasses anything we can give in return. And God's promises are unconditional. God will never go back on what is promised. God is ever faithful to the promises made. God's love is unconditional.*

*Explain what a Marriage Covenant is. Refer to the quotes in the workbook but do not read them verbatim. Explain our understanding that a covenant marriage has a sacred goal of 100% commitment from both husband and wife. Just as God intends with the covenant he has made with his people, we are called to pattern our love on Christ's love.*

*This love is not theirs to keep hidden. Christ revealed through the love of a married couple is awesome and is meant for the whole Church. God promises the couple all of the help needed to be faithful to each other and to meet the challenges of living this vocation of Christian marriage in whatever circumstances the couple finds themselves. No Christian couple will ever lack the assistance needed from God to live up to the ideals of Christian marriage and the responsibilities associated with parenthood. End with the statement, “**Marriage as covenant is holy and important to the Church.**”*

**NOTE:** *Don't spend too much time on the Biblical background; about 2/3 of this section should be focused on the marriage covenant.*

## **2. The contract-type love could not sustain us; we needed a covenant love relationship.**

*(CS)*

*Teach that the contractual agreement does not contain the properties necessary to sustain a marriage. Follow the order given in the workbook. A contract is a conditional agreement in which, if one party doesn't perform, the other party doesn't have to perform, whereas a covenant is unconditional. A contract is a 50/50 agreement. A contract insures what I will get out of the agreement. A contract can be terminated, whereas a covenant is forever. A contract has limits; a covenant has limitless possibilities. It is the unconditional love that one spouse has for the other, a covenant love, that will sustain the marriage.*

*In a marriage contract the parties to the agreement set down the terms of the contract and the conditions under which the contract is binding. Failure to abide by the terms of the contract releases the other party or parties from their obligations.*

*We call Christian marriage a covenant because the marriage partners promise to be faithful and to love each other, no matter what. A covenant love is unconditional and is joined to God's unconditional love. This point leads right into III. A. 3, the reading of Ephesians.*

## **3. Read Ephesians 5:21, 25-33 and comment briefly.**

*(CL)*

*(The following is background material only. Your comments should not be preaching, but inviting.)*

*This is a call from St. Paul giving us the opportunity to love each other in the way we deeply long to be loved. The subject of the writing is not men and women, generally, but only husbands and wives (and, more specifically, Christian husbands and wives, since the model presupposes a faith in Christ).*

*There are several words in Greek for love. The word that fits this scripture is **agape**. This kind of love is not so much a matter of emotion as attitude and action. It is the most frequently used form in the New Testament, and because it focuses upon a person's attitudes and actions, one can be asked to agapao someone. Agapao involves giving up one's self-interest to serve and care for another's, being responsive to the needs of the other. And both are commended to all Christians, as well as to husbands and wives.*

## **B. Couple reaction**

*(LH & LW: 2 min. total)*

### **1. Share what unconditional love means to me.**

*Share a reflection after reading Ephesians 5:21, 25-32. Do not explain the passage but talk about what it means to you in your marriage relationship. When referring to Ephesians, use the same wording as in the workbook from the NRSV. Your sharing should be focused on the call in Ephesians to love unconditionally, the struggles as well as the joys.*

### **2. Share on what it means to love my spouse as my own body.**

*Other lay spouse shares a reflection on Ephesians 5:21, 25-32, focusing on their understanding of what it means to "love my spouse as my own body."*

## **IV. The gifts of our Marriage Covenant (8 min. total)**

### **The presence of Christ in our relationship gives our love these qualities.**

*(LH & LW: A - C., 3 min. total)*

*We are speaking about the ways that God is tangible, visibly apparent to you. You know God is present in your love for one another because you feel it, you experience it. A - D are the ways. Teach and give personal examples for each gift/quality.*

*Through the working of the spirit of love, Christ is present in our relationship. His presence brings with it four extraordinary gifts -- they are the gift of contagious love (draws other people to love), life-giving love (enables us to be life giving to others), raised above the ordinary (transforming love) and healing love (restores and revitalizes our relationships). Section IV. A - D needs to be delivered with a great deal of positive energy. Our covenant gifts help us to become an "extraordinary" couple in today's culture. Show through personal examples how we have used these gifts to help us live out our call to become an image of God's love. Be careful not to be repetitive. This should be a rich, hope-filled sharing. We want them to realize they all can possess these gifts. Using these gifts draws the couple into intimacy with God. This is holiness. The couple's holiness is attempting to make their will conform to God's will or God's plan for them in marriage.*

## **A. Contagious**

*Remember when you came off your weekend, people would ask you what happened? There was a glow about the two of you. You radiated God's love. You couldn't keep it to yourself. You couldn't wait to tell your family. People wanted to be around you, because they felt the love, strength and inspiration too. Our love becomes contagious to the point that anyone who experiences us can't help but feel better about themselves and "wanting what we have" though they can't really identify what it is. We remember when we have been affected by another couple's love for each other, envying it and being challenged by it.*

## B. Life-giving

*God's love, presence is life-giving. It brings new life, sometimes through parenthood and the beautiful gift of a new child. Be sure to make the point that the love and patience you have to share with others is overflowing from the love you share together. In other words, your love is **first** life-giving to each other and from there moves out into family and the world.*

*This is not only about being life-giving biologically but being deeply nurturing parents as well. It also is the ability to be life-giving to those around us through being able to recognize their gifts and potential and knowing how to affirm and challenge them to love each other more. Affirmation is the greatest challenge we can be given -- to live up to the goodness and potential others see in us. This is also about being willing to share the ups and downs of our own life to help others make sense out of theirs. They say that an infant will die if it is not held, nurtured and loved. Your love is powerful and gives life when you are around children, the elderly, etc.*

## C. Raised above the ordinary

*Have you ever come off a weekend and you commented later, we were flying sky-high, or we felt 10 feet tall? You were experiencing the gift of being raised above the ordinary. Did you ever notice how the big problems before your weekend didn't seem so big after you went home? You were experiencing being raised above the ordinary.*

*The presence of Jesus in our love enables us to live on a different level than most of the couples in the world around us, not being shackled to the deadening ordinariness of everyday but able to find opportunities to love even in the commonplace. It makes it possible to grow and even thrive through difficult periods and crises that might well tear other marriages apart. The gift to rise above the ordinary helps us to know with certainty that the two of us together in love can do or overcome anything.*

## D. Healing

*(CL & CS: 5 min. total)*

*Have you ever felt broken as a person and experienced becoming whole again through the love of your spouse? We are not talking just about healing little hurts here; we're talking about healing the person as well. Healing is a process, not something that necessarily happens instantly. God's redemptive love heals through your love of your spouse. Healing is the gift; the key to opening this gift is asking and giving forgiveness. Share a personal example in your relationship that is not a huge, traumatic one, but one shared in a way that the participants will believe that they, too, can open this gift in their marriage. End the section by reminding them that notes on forgiveness and healing can be found in the Appendix on page 66.*

***Healing love** is the most precious gift. Our brokenness is most often the result of our own perception of our personal weaknesses and defects. We strive so hard to hide what we see as our unlovability. The only thing that can heal us is the certain reassurance that we are truly lovable. And that can come best from the one person who has said yes to loving us for a lifetime. Healing is never an event -- it is a process. It can begin in a forgiveness and healing event, like a dialogue, but it is perfected or completed in the gift of self (which love is) to the hurting one. Most often in a relationship when one spouse is hurting it is because they doubt, to some degree, that they are really loved. ("If he really loved me, he would never have said that." "If she really love me, she would never have done that.") Which brings on doubts about one's lovability. That "brokenness" is what **can and must be healed** by the covenant love of one's spouse. Jesus' presence in our love makes that deep healing happen. The Incarnate Love of God heals through the covenant love of spouses in marriage. Sometimes there is no occasion for this healing throughout our day. We may sweep it under the rug and minimize the brokenness. These many hurts add up and become barriers to our intimacy.*

*In sharing IV. D, choose an everyday example of a hurt, not a huge, traumatic one. This special gift of healing should be shared in a way that will help the couples believe they, too, can use this gift in their marriage. We want them to understand that the hurts that happen do not have to destroy our intimacy. God has given us a wonderful gift of healing, and when used frequently in marriage, it can restore our fractured covenant to wholeness. This healing sharing should be shared in an interplay fashion without duplication.*

*We need to make it clear that the forgiveness was the beginning of the healing. We don't want to make it appear as if asking for forgiveness immediately heals all of the hurts.*

- 1. The power of healing is available to us.**
- 2. Couple's sharing of the experience of healing**
- 3. Motivation to use the gift of healing in our everyday lives**

**V. We are the Church (11 min. total)**

**A. Share my understanding of "We are members of His Body."**

*(LH or LW: 1 min.)*

*The Scripture was read back in III.A. As this is a whole new concept, a transition is needed.*

**B. The couple relationship is a "little church." Parallel: Just as the Church is called upon to be a sign of Christ's love for all people, so is the married couple called to be a sign of Jesus' love for each other and for the whole Church.**

*(Other lay spouse: 2 min.)*

*In your own words, define "little church." Our couple relationship is like the church, exhibiting traits and yielding gifts for those around us. In this way we as a couple are like a "little church." Our "little church" is the heart of the family. Each family is a small cell in the whole body of Christ that makes up the church. All the families, when joined as one, make up the larger church. Many times we think of the church as a hierarchical structure rather than the living body that it is. Share a personal example of how you see yourself as a couple being "little church." Bring this from theory to reality by sharing a practical example. Ideas: We, as "little church" are filled with the gifts of mercy, love, and forgiveness. How do you, as a couple, show these gifts to the larger church, and to the world?*

**C. Share on how your relationship with the Church has changed since the weekend; pastor shares how he/she lives his/her calling to the ministry today.**

*(LH, LW, CL & CS: 1.5 min. each)*

*Share how your awareness, perception and relationship with the church have changed since your weekend/deeper. Clergy shares how your awareness, perception and relationship with your people, "the church," have changed, and how your lifestyle in the church has changed since your weekend/deeper.*

**D. Living examples of the Marriage Covenant**

**Give specific examples of couples living the covenant relationship and their impact on us.**

*(LH or LW: 2 min.)*

*This is a sharing of the examples of two or three couples who have had an impact on your life because of their love, i.e., their reaching out to other people, their forgiveness, their mercy. These can be couples living their covenant in their own relationship and with others. Don't be afraid to share couples who live a radical lifestyle because of their love. You will not scare off the participants. (We are not called to imitate each other's covenant, but each couple is called to live their covenant.)*

## VI. Preparation for extended dialogue (9 min. total)

*Throughout this section eye contact with the couples experiencing the weekend is important. Enthusiasm is important, but the caution is to be careful not to interject our own expectations. Clergy gives a **transition** to VI.*

### A. Introduce 60/75.

*(CL: 1 min.)*

*This needs to be a clear statement of what is about to take place. This introduction needs to be positive and optimistic for the couples. Tell them the time allotted for writing and for dialogue. Don't go into the nuts and bolts of how we are going to do it. That will be covered in B. It needs to be an upbeat introduction into an opportunity for growth in their relationship that they may never have experienced before.*

*Be careful not to go into expectations that this will be something that, in fact, it may not be for some. Let the beauty of the extended dialogue speak for itself.*

### B. Give instructions.

*(LH or LW: 1 min.)*

*Give the details of how to plan for this next phase of the weekend: extra paper; eliminating distractions; how to use the handout; making one's spouse the focus of the next 2 hours and 15 minutes; using the time to share thoughts and ideas, dreams and opinions, but describing feelings completely whenever they come; staying together in their rooms for the full dialogue time. The handout should be given out now (put in their notebooks unopened).*

### C. Motivate.

#### 1. **This Church we have been speaking about, these people, are all over the world and they are praying, just so you can love each other and experience each other more deeply and fully than ever before.**

*(LH or LW: 1. & 2., 2 min.)*

*Tell them that encountered couples everywhere know this is the time for their Extended Dialogue and that Extended Dialogue time is starting all around the world as weekends are held. Give them a powerful sense of the prayer support going on all around them.*

#### 2. **One couple is praying especially for you. Explain.**

*Be sure to make the Prayer Couple concept very clear to the participants; remember, while it is familiar to you, it's new to them. Tell them some of the things their prayer couple might be doing right now and have been doing since they received their name. Tell them how you felt on your weekend (i.e., less apprehensive, more energized to write, supported, etc.) when you heard about having a prayer couple.*

#### 3. **This time is profoundly important to you, to us, to the Church. God wants the complete joy for you that comes from knowing each other more fully.**

*(CS: 1 min.)*

*This section gives the presenters the opportunity to share in your own words what a wonderful experience this can be for the couples and how there are many people supporting them in their efforts. In your own words, share how many people are aware of them and praying for them for the next few hours.*

*Share your hopes and dreams for them, but be sensitive to their apprehension. Be careful not to promise something you can't deliver. Be encouraging and passionate, but don't share past*

*weekend experiences that may be unachievable. Let the couples have their own special Sunday morning. Share with them how God is truly a part of their relationship and is hoping that this morning will help them grow in their closeness and deepen their intimacy.*

- D. “We are now going to play the song, ‘If Tomorrow Never Comes,’ sung by Garth Brooks. We encourage you to listen carefully to the words, found on page 50 of the workbook. Following the song, we ask that wives go silently to their rooms while the husbands stay in the conference room to write what could be the greatest loveletter of your lives.”**

*(CL: 4 min)*

**Handout for dialogue: Marriage As Covenant**

**Writing time: 60 minutes**

**Dialogue time: 75 minutes**

**(Husbands stay in the conference room to write)**

MARRIAGE AS COVENANT  
**EXTENDED DIALOGUE HANDOUT**

1. What are my reasons for wanting to go on living?
2. What are my reasons for wanting to go on living with you?
3. What are the qualities that made you special to me when we first met? What are the qualities that make you special to me now?
4. How do I think you need me now?
5. Do I see and accept you as you are? Please explain.
6. Do I see and accept myself as I really am? Please explain.
7. What are my feelings about our sexual relationship?
8. How do I feel about the role of God, or the absence of God, in our relationship?
9. Do I believe that the way we love one another can really affect other people (friends and children)? Please explain.



**DIALOGUE QUESTIONS TO HELP DEVELOP THIS TALK:**

1. What were my hopes and dreams for our married life in the time before we were married? WAMFAMA?
2. What quality(ies) made you special to me at the time of our marriage? WAMFAMA?
3. On the day of our marriage what was my primary focus? WAMFAMA?
4. What was the significance of the place where we chose to get married? WAMFRT?
5. What was the significance of our marriage in the Church? WAMFAMA?
6. At the time we were married, what did I believe the role of the pastor to be? WAMFAMA?
7. What did I believe the function of the pastor to be on our original weekend? WAMFAMA?
8. How do I view the role of the pastor in our lives now? WAMFAMA?
9. How have our lives been touched by a relationship(s) with a pastor(s)? WAMFAMA?
10. How have our lives been affected by relationships with other couples? WAMFAMA?
11. What do I understand a covenant to be? WAMFAMA?
12. What do I understand a contract to be? WAMFAMA?
13. Do we have a covenant love? WAMFAMA?
14. WAMF when I read Ephesians 5:21, 25-32?
15. WAMF when I read Ephesians 5:21-24?
16. How have I loved you unconditionally in the past two weeks? WAMFAMA?
17. Do I love my own body? WAMFAMA?
18. How do I show my love for my body? WAMFAMA?
19. How do I love you as I love my own body? WAMFAMA?
20. Share a recent example of how our love has been contagious? WAMFAMA?
21. How are we life-giving? WAMFAMA?
22. Share a time when you have raised me above the ordinary. WAMFTYT?
23. Have I hurt you in the last week? WAMFTYT?
24. Have I been hurt by you in the last week? WAMFTYT?
25. Because of who I am is it difficult for me to ask for forgiveness? WAMFAMA?
26. When did I last say I am sorry? WAMFAMA?
27. Are there any hurts in our relationship that now need healing? WAMFAMA?
28. WAMF when I hear the words, "We are the Church?"
29. How have we been "little church" in the last two weeks? WAMFAMA?
30. Since our weekend, how has our relationship with the Church changed? WAMFAMA?
31. What couple(s) have touched our lives? WAMFAMA?
32. How have these couples touched our lives? WAMFAMA?
33. What were my feelings when I was asked to write an extended loveletter?
34. WAMF recalling our extended dialogue on our original weekend?
35. WAMF knowing that one special couple is praying for me on a weekend?