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## The greatest wedding gift

Premarital education helps couples to marry with eyes wide open

BY JOHN JOHNSTON | [JJHONSTON@ENQUIRER.COM](mailto:JJHONSTON@ENQUIRER.COM)

Striving to pull off the perfect wedding with a million things on their minds - a band or DJ? Lilies or roses? Suit or tux? - engaged couples might easily overlook what *really* matters:

Their relationship.

"The biggest gift you can give to your spouse and to yourself is to see what your true values are, what you really want out of life, what's important to you, who you are as an individual, what you want to give one another and how you see your future," says Carole Adlard.

ADVERTISEMENT Those issues are hallmarks of a good premarital education program, says Adlard, executive director of Healthy Visions, a local nonprofit agency with programs that focus on healthy relationships.

Premarital counseling is played for laughs in the film "License to Wed," which opened in theaters last week. Robin Williams' character is a pastor who won't bless a couple's union until they pass his marriage-prep class.

But high divorce rates are no joke, which is why the field of premarital education has been growing.

A handful of states - Ohio and Kentucky are not among them - have enacted laws that encourage couples to undergo premarital education. This year Texas became the most recent to do so when it waived the marriage license fee for couples that take an eight-hour premarital education class.

Secular programs grow

Religious organizations traditionally have been at the forefront of marriage education, and they still have a prominent role. But a variety of secular programs - some created with government funding - have sprung up over the years.

"I think there's a need for both," says Shahne Stone of Lebanon.



THE ENQUIRER / MICHAEL E. KEATING

Mark and Amber Owens tied the knot on June 30. They had gone through an eight-session premarital program that covers such topics as communication, finances, parenting and sex, led by the Rev. DeLayno Robinson (right) of Great Commission Bible Church in Springfield Township.

### Programs available for couples

These education programs are open to engaged, cohabitating and seriously dating couples, as well as married couples.

Cincinnati Relationship Center offers a two-day workshop, "A Passage to Intimacy," 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday in Kenwood. \$600 per couple. The next 16-week session of PAIRS (Practical Analysis of Intimate Relationship Skills) begins Sept. 11. 513-794-9144; [www.pairs.com](http://www.pairs.com).

Love Thinks, offered by Marriage Work, is a 20-session program that begins 6-8 p.m. Sept. 10 in Lebanon. It's free, and dinner and

He and his wife of 10 years, Missy, lead marriage education programs for Dayton-based Marriage Works. With federal funds, the agency this year began offering a non-faith-based premarital program in Warren County and elsewhere.

Stone, a part-time pastor, says clergy who focus mainly on the spiritual aspects of marriage sometimes refer couples to Marriage Works, which emphasizes basic relationship skills, such as communication.

"What I've seen in a lot of marriages - and even my own in the first year - is that when you're merging two worlds into one, communication is the biggest (challenge)," Stone says.

But many engaged or seriously dating couples can't see that far ahead.

"They're in that early stage of being in love, and thinking that the other person is just like them, and they don't think they need education like this," says therapist Joyce DeVoge.

Couples need to know that "all relationships go through bumps in the road so to speak," she says. "That's what builds a marriage. When they've successfully navigated the challenges, it strengthens a marriage and a relationship."

Ideally, couples should begin learning how to handle those bumps before marriage, when they are "motivated to see the best in their partner," DeVoge says. Many wait until the marriage is disintegrating and emotional distress is high, which often is too late.

She and her husband of 33 years, Tom DeVoge, a licensed clinical psychologist, are co-owners of Cincinnati Relationship Center in Kenwood. They offer a course called PAIRS, which stands for Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills. The six-month, 120-hour course focuses on topics such as communication, conflict management, negotiation, family background, physical closeness and common marital pitfalls. The DeVoges also offer one- and two-day workshops.

## FAITH-BASED PROGRAMS

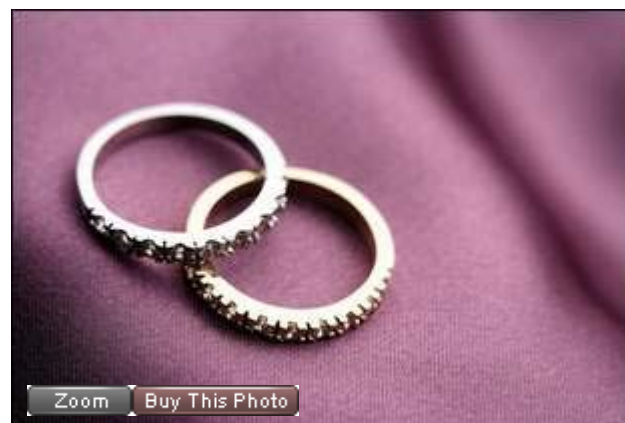
As for faith-based premarital programs, there's wide variation in what's offered.

Catholics are required to participate in a premarital program. The Diocese of Covington gives couples a choice of three, including Engaged Encounter, a weekend retreat led by a senior presenting couple (who have been married more than 12 years), a junior presenting couple (married less than 12 years) and a priest.

"I don't think (young couples) pay a lot of attention to five years from now - when they wake up next to each other, what's that going to be like?" says Diane Green of Union. She and her husband, Joe, have been presenting Engaged Encounter for six years.

"That's what we try to get them to concentrate on - when you have children and car and house payments and mother-in-laws and all that ..."

child care are provided. 866-548-3271; [www.trustmarriage.com](http://www.trustmarriage.com).



In some churches, a couple might meet with a pastor a couple of times. But not at Great Commission Bible Church in Springfield Township.

The pastor, DeLayno Robinson, first meets with a couple to address "pre-engagement questions," such as how they resolve problems and whether they want the same things out of life. From there, he leads an eight-session premarital program that covers such topics as communication, finances, parenting and sex, all from a biblical perspective.

## **VALUABLE LESSONS**

"We needed it," says Amber Owens. She and her husband, Mark, of Forest Park, finished the last of their sessions with Robinson on June 28, and married two days later.

"These premarital sessions have really shown me who I am as a woman, what kind of wife I'm to become, as well as what kind of mother," Amber says.

Mark Owens says that because their intent is to have "a faith marriage," it made sense to have faith-based counseling.

Robinson says his premarital program is comprehensive enough that he doesn't feel a need to refer couples to outside programs. But some pastors direct couples to one of three widely used premarital assessment tools: Foccus, Prepare and Relate. Each uses a questionnaire, which both the man and woman complete.

In September, Healthy Visions will begin offering Prepare to churches and unchurched individuals.

Adlard says it's "a good way to find out compatibility, identify your strengths, build on the strengths, identify weaknesses, and get people to help you work through those weaknesses, so the likelihood of success is much greater."

Whether secular or religious, a premarital program won't be effective if couples simply go through the motions, experts say.

"They get out of the premarital program what they put in," says Green, of Engaged Encounter. "It's a partnership deal. Both need to be open to learning, open to communicating with each other."