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Ministers hope to build strong marriages

by Marie Rohde



Wilber and Esther Gomez, parishioners at St. Mary's Cathedral in Grand Island, Neb., renew their wedding vows at an anniversary Mass celebrated Feb. 12 by Grand Island Bishop William J. Dendinger. The couple was celebrating 35 years of marriage. Couples throughout the Diocese of Grand Island attended the Mass, celebrating World Marriage Day. (CNS photo/Mary Parlin, West Nebraska Register)

MILWAUKEE -- Over the past 29 years, Lorrie Gramer helped prepare 25,000 couples for marriage in the Rockford, Ill., diocese.

"On the Friday night before the wedding, I tell the couples that they have paid the florist and the caterer and they've gone home," Gramer said. "But the church is still there."

The church is more to a marriage than a backdrop for the ceremony -- it is a couple's lifelong commitment to uphold church teachings.

Gramer is president-elect of the National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministries, a group that

attracted some 280 participants to a conference called the "Marriage-building Construction Zone" at Marquette University in Milwaukee Aug. 3-6. Almost all attending were lay parish leaders who had paid their own way, although there were a few priests and permanent deacons.

"Marriage-building is a lay movement," Gramer said. "The bishops gave us the framework, but this is the third annual conference where this has been our theme."

In 2004, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops announced that promoting, preserving and protecting marriage is a priority for the church. Five years later, the conference issued a pastoral letter, "Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan."

Strong marriages, Gramer said, are the foundation for more than the church.

"Pope John Paul II said it best," Gramer said. "Humanity is passed through the family. The best thing I can do for my grandchildren is to love my husband."

Eve Marchese, a lay minister and evangelist in the Rockford diocese, is struggling with difficult questions that start with marriage but go beyond.

"We're dealing with a lot of new issues," Marchese said. "What do you say to a mother whose daughter is gay? How do you keep them both in the church?"

Gramer said we need to stop trying to be politically correct on such matters.

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"Of course we still love our sons and daughters," she said. "As a church we are saying they deserve human dignity. But there is a social order created by God. God is the author of marriage."

Marcellino D'Ambrosio, a historical theologian and author, said church teaching is not really understood. "Is the Catholic church really prudish? Is it really against sex?" he asked during his keynote address. "The Catholic church promotes the natural way of life. It is the way we are made, what we are made for, and it's healthy."

More than ever, the church teaching on marriage is countercultural. The U.S. Census Bureau 2010 figures showed that marriage is no longer the norm. Married couples head only 48 percent of American households. At the same time, state-by-state figures are showing that the number same-sex households still represent a tiny fraction but are increasing dramatically.

Doug Meske, a Milwaukee psychotherapist, gave practical advice during the three-day event in Milwaukee. Meske, who conducted a workshop for family life ministers in the Rockford diocese recently, advocated that each parish develop a marriage coordinator.

"They would be the first responders for troubled marriages," he said, adding that often the cry for help comes late. The call for help has to come from the couple, Meske said. "The couple has to take the initiative. Not their parents, not their friends."

Often, he said, the root of the problems in the marriage is financial, especially with the high unemployment rate. A program coordinator can find someone in the parish to help those in need, he said.

Meske suggested that every parish have some marriage-building event each month. "People in the pews want to hear what they can do to help build strong marriages," he said.

Some parishes are reluctant to create such positions because of liability issues, according to several participants in the session he led.

Meske said there needs to be a clear distinction between the ministry and professional counseling. The parish counselors should be trained to know the difference.

Fr. Richard Mevissen, a retired Redemptorist priest living in the Milwaukee archdiocese, continues to work with families as he has done throughout his ministry.

The conference, he said, is important to energize those working with families and can provide coordination. Learning from what others have tried can help.

"Some of our parishes are running too many programs with too little money," Mevissen said. "The church has had to cut back when there is more need than ever."

Lucia Baez Luzondo, director of the family life program for the Miami archdiocese, said success is critically important. "If we don't attend to these needs, we can say goodbye to the essence of the Catholic church," she said.

[Marie Rohde, who lives in Milwaukee, is an occasional contributor to *NCR*.]

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