

PROTAGONIST CORNER

by Joan S. Gray

Oglethorpe Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia

Emily Warren is an acquaintance of a member of your congregation. She is engaged to be married within a month. Her fiancée, who lives in Seattle, is flying into town four days before the wedding, and they will be leaving immediately after their wedding trip to take up residence in Seattle. She has requested that you perform the wedding service to be held in the home of a friend. Neither she nor her fiancée are members of any church, and as far as you can tell from her answers to your questions, neither are professing Christians. She has already been turned down by three other ministers who refused to officiate at the service unless she and her fiancée will participate in four to six premarital counseling sessions over a period of a month. What do you do?

The above vignette illustrates a perennial problem facing not just parish ministers, but almost anyone who is ordained. Clergy who may seldom officiate at funerals, baptize or even preach will still receive calls from total strangers asking them to perform the marriage service because they are ordained, and as such, are licensed agents of the state. In simpler times it was common for couples simply to show up at the parsonage or church office asking to be married within days or even hours. Even for couples who were members of the church, extended counseling before marriage was rare. However, with the divorce rate spiralling upward, many pastors began to feel that integrity in their contacts with engaged couples demanded a more serious approach. Perhaps in response to the advent of a pastoral care emphasis in seminary training, the route chosen by many in response to this need has been to require that engaged couples schedule a number of counseling appointments with them prior to the ceremony. Covering a wide range of topics from money management to religion to sex, these sessions have helped many couples build a firmer foundation for their marriage. They have also helped ministers feel better about their responsibility for the future of the marital relationship. The requirement that counseling must precede the wedding causes little problem for many couples. In fact, they often welcome the opportunity to talk about their relationship in depth.

But what about the Emily Warrens? Those who are simply not comfortable with this kind of experience or those who for reasons of time or distance cannot schedule a number of sessions with the minister seem to fall between the cracks. While we sincerely attempt to uphold the high standards of Christian marriage in requiring premarital counseling of all couples, they may be hearing us say, "Do it my way, or else. . . ." Unchurched couples who seek out a minister to perform their wedding, only to be turned down repeatedly, must surely develop a rather jaundiced view of the church and its clergy. False impressions developed out of this experience range from "They only care about members of the church," to "We have to pass some sort of 'test' before he will

marry us," to "The preacher cares more about her rules than about us." Uncorrected, such negative feelings may fester into outright hostility against the church in years to come.

My experience in dealing with people like Emily Warren has led me to reconsider whether extensive premarital counseling is necessary or even helpful for all engaged couples. Perhaps it is time for us to explore other forms pastoral work can take prior to the wedding and to come up with some creative ways to meet the needs of those who are now being turned away. Toward that end I offer three comments.

First, research in the area of evangelism has indicated that there are certain key events in life that tend to make one more open to the gospel. These events include the birth of a child, a death in the family, and marriage. Even for a compatible couple with an excellent relationship, marriage is in reality a "leap of faith." In dealing with unchurched couples seeking to be married, I have found them surprisingly open to discussing things spiritual in the context of the wedding service. I believe that here the minister has a wonderful opportunity to touch lives in such a way that may later result in Christian commitment and church membership. A good relationship established while planning and celebrating a wedding is an excellent basis for future evangelistic contacts. However, we must *earn* the right to approach them with the gospel by being open to their perceived need and accepting them where they are at present.

Second, why not look on the wedding service itself as a teaching opportunity rather than as the culmination of a period of prior instruction? If a sacrament is "an outward sign of an inward grace," then certainly the wedding of people who love each other has a sacramental character. The human reality reflects the divine; the divine reality illuminates the human. Words like grace, forgiveness, faith and commitment take on flesh. The wedding celebrates the miracle and mystery of human love in the context of the mystery and miracle of God's love. In it we bear witness to a God who is personal and relational, who created us for joy, and who is involved in every area of human life, not just the "spiritual."

In order to foster this exercise in "incarnational theology," my practice is to give the couple a copy of the service I plan to use several weeks before the wedding day. I ask them to go over it separately, then together, noting things they like or dislike along with any suggestions for changes. When we meet several days before the wedding, they have already made an investment in the service, and the foundation for a meaningful discussion about the spiritual dimension of marriage has been laid. Heard sensitively, their comments on various parts of the service can initiate conversation about numerous areas of the marital relationship. This kind of learning experience can be fostered in spite of limitations of time and distance by mailing the copies to the couple in advance. The result is a service that is not only meaningful to the couple, but also a witness to others present who may seldom darken the church's door.

Third, even the best premarital counseling is no guarantee that a marriage will not face rough times. With all the excitement surrounding the wedding it is probable that little the minister says will be remembered specifically. Given these realities, perhaps the most helpful thing any minister can do is to assure

the couple that they are not in this marriage all alone. If the problems become overwhelming there are a variety of people who can help them.

If they are going to be settling locally, let them know that you are available if they need to talk with you in the future. Tell them about community counseling resources, especially those that do not charge or have a sliding scale of payments geared to what clients can afford. Stress that there is nothing wrong with seeking professional help to heal their relationship if it becomes damaged or to nurture its growth in the years ahead. I have found that a personal faith in God and the support of a community that shares that faith are two things that have helped me weather hard times in my own marriage. I share this insight with couples at times and urge them to consider finding a place where they can explore that kind of faith and find that support when they are settled in their new home. Perhaps more than any other part of the premarital contact, these suggestions about where to find help will be of lasting value, as well as a source of hope in difficult days ahead.

These comments are in no way meant to denigrate the usefulness of premarital counseling for most couples, but rather to speak for a balanced approach to pastoral work before the wedding. For some people the time prior to their wedding may be the one occasion in their entire lives that they actively seek out the ministry of the church. It is tragic to let them go away untouched for lack of creative, flexible strategies that will meet their needs while upholding the integrity of the minister.