Marriage & the Power of Prayer

Plus > Gullah: A Richly Woven Way of Life
> UGA's Rennie Curran
Couples Discover the Power of Prayer

By Tera E. Hurt, Ph.D., University of Georgia, with contribution from Chris Bell
For a growing number of couples, marriage enrichment programs offer valuable life skills to help strengthen a marriage. Unlike marriage counseling, which involves overcoming a specific problem, marriage enrichment programs help with a wider range of issues. Skills typically center around communication, effective problem-solving, intimacy, and forging relationships with other couples and marriage mentors who are committed to their marriages.

While marriage enrichment programs provide an opportunity to work on strengthening important relationship-building skills, couples may struggle with practicing learned skills and techniques when they need them the most—during disagreements and times of stress.

Studies show that issues related to household finances are among the top reasons for marital conflict and stress, and subsequently, have a high correlation to divorce. Even when compared to issues involving sex and intimacy, problems arising from marital affairs, or differences in child-rearing, money issues still rank at the top.

Often, marital issues pose more challenges to Black couples and families than those in the larger population. According to the 2005-2007 American Community Survey, in Gwinnett County, 42% of black adults were married as compared to 57% in the total population. Among married adults, Blacks reported being less satisfied in their marriages than white couples.

Prayer Works

Researchers at the University of Georgia have been exploring ways to strengthen African American marriages through marital enrichment programs. In 2005, the UGA team added something extra to their enrichment program—prayer. The Program for Strong African American Marriages (ProSAAM) integrates the role of prayer with effective communication strategies and problem-solving techniques. ProSAAM’s objective is to find the best ways for African American couples to keep their relationships strong.

To date, more than 480 couples from northeast Georgia and metro Atlanta have taken part in the program. Participation requires couples to be willing to pray and be prayed for, as well as participate in three educational program sessions. When asked about their success in the program and the ease with sticking to the skills learned, most couples found it to be much easier when daily prayer was involved. Most also cited having someone pray for them as a reason for success.

To qualify for the program, couples must have at least one African American mate, be at least 21 years of age, and be married and living together or engaged to be married within one year. For more information, visit: http://www.uga.edu/prosaam.

Communication is Key

ProSAAM participants Rochelle and Gregory Barnett, married for 29 years with two adult children, found the program through a minister at their church. When asked about prayer, Rochelle commented, “Prayer is essential in our marriage and helps us both clear our hearts and receive instruction and correction from God. It’s been challenging with Gregory out of work, but the Lord has provided for us and this challenge in itself is developing character in our marriage and making it stronger. We both agree that communicating on a daily basis is key to a successful marriage. If the lines of communication are open, that’s half the battle. The issues are secondary, and we believe they can always be resolved.”

Achieving Success

Married for nine years, James Leal, and his wife, both pastors, went into the program believing strongly in the value marriage. The two entered the program with the goal of learning skills that could help them teach other couples as a part of their ministry. They found the program to be more structured than other enrichment programs they had tried. “The skills were very easy to adapt, but difficult at times to implement,” recalled James Leal.

Married nearly four years, Clydette and Godric Morton agree the skills were easy, but remember them being challenging to apply in the heat of the moment. “We have learned to apply them more often, before a heated moment started, which definitely proved to help with our communication,” Clydette said. “We definitely don’t argue as much as we did early in our marriage and if we do it’s different. If things do get heated, I honestly believe that’s when all the praying steps in and guides us through.”

Clydette and her husband, who make sure to pray together at least once a day over dinner, were sold on the program after hearing that a church in another state would be praying for them. “I’ve always been a big believer that God listens to prayers even if you aren’t the one who is praying,” Clydette said. “The more prayers the better!”

Barbara Peters, RN, author of The Gift of a Lifetime: Building a Marriage That Lasts is confident that marriage can and will endure the test of time. According to Peters, marriage is a psychological journey that begins with attraction, travels through a course of self-discovery, and culminates in a satisfying lifelong union. It is forever changing since individuals are constantly growing while traveling life’s fluid path. “Marriage is not about finding the perfect mate, but about working on yourself to become the perfect mate for the spouse you have chosen,” Peters said.