

Training Video #1 - How married couples learn to be sponsors/mentors.

If you are a marriage educator, adapt these ideas to your situation.

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INTRODUCTION

[TRAINER: So, if you are here today because you think have the "perfect marriage," I would say that you are the *one couple I would encourage to find another ministry*. You need to be a "normally nutty" couple to able to help those just beginning the journey of Christian marriage. While these books (*For Better and For Ever*) provide really good information, it is your own life experience through the good times and terrible times of marriage that will help engaged couples learn to survive and grow as married couples. People getting married today are scared that they might not be successful. It does not help them to meet "the perfect couple." They need to know that normal "nutty" couples ...like them...can survive the challenges of marriage.]

NARRATOR: Welcome to the ministry of marriage preparation.

- The task of the church is to teach people how to live the gospel of Jesus.
- Jesus often said, "Love God and love one another."

- Churches are learning to view marriage as a fundamental school of Christian living.
- Helping couples to establish *healthy loving marriages* is the best way to assure that their children will grow up with good Christian values. As adults they will more likely choose to love God and respect other people, *because they learned this behavior from their parents.*
- The most effective way for couples to establish healthy marriages is to encourage them to learn from other married couples who are willing to “*sponsor*” or “*mentor*” those preparing for marriage.
- This video will show you how to do this.

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THE VIDEO AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This video is part of a set of two videos.

- This first video teaches married couples how to function as sponsor couples for engaged couples...using the *For Better and For Ever* workbooks.
- The second video shows church leaders how to set up and sustain this kind of marriage preparation program.
- NOTE *These videos are NOT intended for those preparing for marriage.*

Along with the videos, the web site at www.marriagepreparation.com provides additional materials which you can copy and print as many copies as you wish. On the web site, look for the Search feature and type in the following key words.....

“Our Products & Training Materials”for more about the Video Training materials.

“Explanation of Key Concepts”further explanation of the content < Don’t miss this!

“Practical Steps for setting up the program in your church.”

“Meaning of Terms: Sponsor Couple/Mentor Couple.

“The importance of homework” and how to make sure it gets done!

“Prayer in marriage”

Additional Services to assist you.

- Assistance On-line and by Phone > Contact Us. Marriage Preparation Resources also provides free on-line assistance to Pastors / Marriage Educators / Engaged Couples who send email questions about "getting married" or about the use of *For Better & For Ever*.

There are several ways to use this video and the materials on the web site:

- A staff person or a trained sponsor couple can facilitate a weekend training session on a Saturday or Sunday at your church for couples you have recruited to become sponsor couples. You can use this video and make copies of the “Key Concepts” & “Discussion Questions” for all who take part in the training.
- If you want to train one or two couples and need to do this on a weekday evening (because the couples might be available then and not on the weekend), use parts of this video to clarify some key ideas. Then let the couples take this video, the “Key Concepts” & “Discussion Questions” home with them for review. You might want to purchase several copies of the video so they are available for that purpose.
- Some couples will be able to accomplish a completely “self-directed training” with the help of the videos and the materials they can print out from the web site.

The video is available in VHS and DVD format. The DVD format includes a menu. This helps viewers find specific topic areas quickly.

The *For Better and For Ever* workbook which is used by both the sponsor couple and engaged couple use is pretty much “self-explanatory.” Therefore, rather than go through every chapter in this video, we will just touch on key points. Remember, there is more information in the “Key Concepts” which can be copied and printed from the web site.

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WHAT IS A "SPONSOR/MENTOR COUPLE" AND WHAT DO THEY?

- If you have never before been a “Sponsor Couple” (or “Mentor Couple”), get ready for what is going to be an enriching experience for your marriage. Most sponsor couples claim they benefit even more from the process of “sponsoring” than the couples preparing for Christian Marriage!
- As a “Sponsor Couple,” you help a couple to prepare for marriage by inviting them into your home for a series of five or six weekly meetings. During these meetings you “coach” them toward a realistic understanding of Christian marriage and the skills they will need for continuing to work at the project of their marriage.
- You do this, *not* by lectures, *nor* by claiming that your own marriage is the model to be followed. You invite the couple into a process of reflection and discussion by which both *you* and *they* grow to a better understanding of how to live and love as couples *committed to Christian marriage*. Sharing *your experience* of the “good times” and the “bad times” of Christian marriage will be a key factor in making these meetings feel “safe” and encouraging for the engaged couple.
- It is important to understand that it is NOT your job to determine whether or not the engaged couple should be married in the Church. Your pastor will refer an engaged couple to you only *after*

deciding that they are free to marry in the Church. This does not mean that they are a perfect couple or that they have no issues to deal with, but it does mean the pastor has determined that they have a right to begin the journey of Christian marriage. Ultimately their success as a married couple will depend upon the couple themselves and God's grace. But your efforts to help them develop realistic ideas about marriage and the skills that they will need in dealing with one another may be another important factor in determining their future together.

- Before you begin your meetings with the engaged couple, the pastor will usually direct the couple through some chapters of *For Better and For Ever*.
- It is your responsibility to determine ~ with input from the couple preparing for marriage ~ a plan for dealing with the remaining chapters of *For Better and For Ever*. Then, when you have covered the content of *For Better and For Ever* (usually in 5 or 6 evening sessions), you send the couple back to the pastor for final paper work and the planning of the wedding ceremony.
- But your responsibility as a sponsor couple is not finished. The engaged couple will probably invite you to their wedding and you will surely want to be there to take part in their special day. You will also be planning to "follow-up" with the couple during the first year of their marriage. There are questions in *For Better and For Ever* for the couple to answer after 3 months of marriage and after 6 months of marriage. You will want to meet with them again at least 2 times during that first year of marriage and invite them to share with you their responses to those questions. If they have moved away from your area, use email/phone/letters to do this follow-up. Many sponsor couples develop lasting friendships with couples they have sponsored.

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HOW DO YOU KNOW WHETHER YOU CAN DO THIS?

- Sponsor couples should be "ordinary" married couples from your church congregation. The word, *ordinary*, may need some explanation. By "ordinary" we mean that sponsor couples are usually not members of the professional staff of the church, nor have they gone through formal training to be marriage counselors. Sponsor couples are busy raising children and involved in jobs/professions that keep them far from the church on most days. The reason for selecting them is not their special training, but because they are living a successful Christian marriage.
- What is that? You are living a successful Christian marriage if you are continuing to learn to survive the good times and bad times that take place in every marriage. Sponsor couples do not have a "perfect marriage" nor do they always find marriage an easy way of life. *They are "successful" because they are committed to continuing to keep working at the project of their marriage, and they believe that their faith is part of their secret of success.*
- Common apprehensions or concerns of prospective sponsor couples:
 - 1) Some couples feel they have little to offer those preparing for marriage.

- 2) Some believe they lack the skills needed to deal with engaged couples.
 - 3) Some couples fear their own marriage may not be solid or strong enough.
- Keep watching and you'll discover these concerns can usually be resolved.

[[TESTIMONY by COUPLE...shares our experience of learning the hard way!]]

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THE DESIGN OF THE PROGRAM.

- As you might imagine, couples preparing for marriage are all very different.
1. A growing number of couples are of different faith traditions.
 2. One or both of them may have been married before, or may be a parent even if there was no previous marriage.
 3. A couple may be “living together” or already married in civil law.
 4. There are couples who have never been married before, and may be virgins.
- There are so many possibilities that ministering to couples individually ~ using sponsors (or mentors) ~ is the best way to provide a quality marriage preparation program which can be adapted to the particular situation and needs of each couple.
 - *For Better and For Ever* provides text for study and each chapter concludes with an extensive set of questions to be answered by writing *right in the book*.
 - Experience has proven that when each person takes the time to *write* his/her personal responses to the questions, privately, before discussing the answers with his/her partner, it is easier for the couple to identify differences which will be important to discuss in more detail when they share what they have written. Directions for this writing and sharing are included on page 7 of *For Better and For Ever*.
 - You will also see on page 7 a recommended sequence for covering all the chapters during the meetings in your home. This sequence works well for most couples, but it is easily changed to better meet the needs of the engaged couple. If a particular couple wants to spend more time on a certain topic, that's perfectly OK. The book is intended to be used in a flexible manner.

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PREPARING YOURSELVES...BEFORE MEETING WITH AN ENGAGED COUPLE.

- To prepare for your role as a sponsor couple, you follow the same process as the engaged couple:
1. You read the book...

2. Write your answers to all the questions...Since you are already married, answer the questions in terms of your present relationship with your spouse.

3. Then share your answers in dialogue with your spouse.

- *For Better and For Ever* touches on all the key topics and issues that couples need to “put on the table” and come to terms with before they marry. The goal of dialogue is not to win an argument, but rather to understand one another and decide together how to come to terms with each other’s differences. So.....

- During ~ or after ~ your dialogue with one another, it will be useful to highlight questions or sections of the text of *For Better and For Ever* that you think might be useful to share with the engaged couple. In your meetings with the engaged you will not have time to deal with every question, so you focus on your highlighted questions and text, and then invite them to share with you the text and questions that they found most important or challenging.

- As you gain experience as a sponsor couple, you learn to focus on what the engaged couple needs to deal with. Think of your own sharing as “pump priming.” You share your stories to show them how to share; *once they become comfortable sharing with you, you do much more listening to them than talking about yourselves.*

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LEARNING TO USE EACH OTHER'S STRENGTHS IN PLANNING FOR YOUR SESSIONS WITH THE ENGAGED:

- After you and your spouse have done your own “homework” from *For Better and For Ever* and highlighted text and questions to focus on when you meet with the engaged couple, you also want to decide together what personal experiences you think are useful to share with the engaged couple. As you gain experience as a sponsor couple, this becomes easier to do. It’s like a dance. One leads and the other follows. We both try to be sensitive to each other.

- Some couples write a list of topics and questions they hope to cover. One person takes responsibility for keeping an eye on the clock and takes the initiative in “moving to the next topic” or deciding when a break is needed. While 2 – 2 ½ hours might seem like a lot of time, you will be surprised how quickly the time goes and that is why it is important for someone to watch the clock.

- One of you may be more extroverted and find it easier to initiate conversation. If you’re both outgoing it’s important to exercise restraint to ensure the engaged couple has plenty of opportunity to speak.

- As you gain more experience as a sponsor couple, you will become more confident in using “open-ended questions”, that is, questions which encourages more than just a “yes” or “no” response (and remember, there are no “right” or “wrong” answer to open ended questions). Some examples:

1. So...what did you find most helpful (or most interesting) about the homework for this evening?

2. Any surprises when you shared your answers with one another?
 3. What have you learned about yourself as you answered the questions?
 4. What new insights do you have into the other person (or his/her family)?
 5. What do you find easier, to “listen” to your partner or to “share” your personal ideas?
- If one partner is a better reader, then he or she might be the one who reads passages out of *For Better and For Ever*. Scripture, especially letters from Saint Paul, can sound awkward if not read properly.
 - Not everyone has great organizational skills. The spouse with this gift is probably better suited to schedule the meetings with the couple. He or she might also serve well by directing the planning you will need to do as a couple as you prepare for each session with the engaged couple.

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DECIDING WHERE TO MEET.

- The sessions are held in your home, usually in the kitchen or dining room or den. Choose whatever is comfortable for you and provides some degree of privacy from your children so that you can speak candidly about personal topics.
- Having the sessions in your home (rather than at a meeting room at the church) has a purpose that may not be obvious to the engaged couple. Be aware that your family is the smallest unit of the Church. You are welcoming the engaged couple not only into your family home, but also into your Church community. Some (many) engaged couples have been away from the church community for some time. A welcoming atmosphere in your home may be a key factor in helping them feel “at home” in the Church where you worship! When a sponsor couple develops a good relationship with the engaged couple, it often happens that the engaged couple ~ who had not been to church in years ~ begins to worship together again on Sunday.

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MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS.

- The more obvious reason to having the meetings with the engaged couple in your home is to allow them to see and experience a real Christian marriage and family “in action.” Your home is a very special kind of classroom. You want your home to be as normal as possible. Do not spend a day cleaning everything as you might if your pastor was coming to visit for the first time. But do control distractions.
- Plan to turn down the telephone ringer so you won’t hear it; let the answering machine take calls during your sessions with the engaged couple. Ask them to agree that cell phones (yours and theirs) will be turned off during your meetings. By the way, do leave the phone on until the couple arrives, in case they call asking for directions or to say they’re running late.

- Turn off your radio and/or TV.
- Think about pets – they can be distracting to some people.
- Explain to your children that when you meet with the engaged couple they are very important guests and you do not want to be disturbed, unless it's really important. Or schedule sessions when your kids are out of the house participating in scheduled activities. Naturally, there are times when a young child may need your attention, but this should be the exception and not the rule. If something happens and you need to deal with it, for example, a sick child, that becomes part of the experience of marriage preparation!
- When you set the date for a session, avoid special events (such as Monday Night Football) if anyone is a fan who will be distracted by having to miss the game.

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SNACKS & BREAKS.

- You will not know what the engaged couple likes to drink, so at the first meeting offer a variety of drinks such as coffee, tea, water and soft drinks. Offer only non-alcoholic beverages.
- Some sponsor couples prefer to put out snacks even before the engaged arrive, others prefer to take a break mid-way through the evening and have the snacks then. It is up to you.
- Avoid snacks that are very elaborate and/or very expensive...this puts too much focus on the snacks and can be a distraction to the serious agenda of marriage preparation.
- Speaking of food....Many sponsor couples plan to share a meal with the engaged couple, at some point, during or after the series of 5 or 6 evening sessions.

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PRAYER: (J&J should narrate this)

- Surveys of married couples ~ done by both Catholics and Protestants ~ consistently confirm that couples who describe themselves as “most content with their marriage” list “prayer as a couple” as one of the critical factors in the success of their marriage. Couples who worship together on Sunday and pray together at home are not likely to ever experience the tragedy of divorce. For this reason, the *For Better and For Ever* program expects the sponsor couple to teach engaged couples how to pray together so that *prayer as a couple* becomes a normal part of their married life.
- In Appendix B there are prayers designed for each session. The sponsor couple and the couple preparing for marriage can read them together, at the beginning and end of each meeting. Scripture passages are written to make them easier to locate in the Bible, but it is far better to read from the Bible when you use these prayers with an engaged couple. Or you can pray together spontaneously (without

using the written prayers or the Scripture passages). How you decide to pray with the engaged couple is up to you, but do pray with them!

- While prayer during the sessions is important. Learning to pray as a part of your daily life and activities is an even more important skill for your marriage. When planning each session, we find everything goes much smoother if we first spend a couple of minutes in prayer together. Praying together is a special way of inviting Jesus into our busy lives. It also helps us connect and get in sync with each other for marriage preparation. We encourage you to make this part of your own planning sessions.
- We also say a brief prayer together just before the engaged couple arrives. It is our way to invite Jesus into the sessions and remind ourselves that we are not alone in our efforts to minister to the engaged couple.
- There have been times just prior to our marriage prep meeting that we were not getting along with each other. Perhaps we had an argument or were just irritated with each other. If this happens, in fact, especially when it does, if we take ~ even just a few minutes ~ to pray, it makes all the difference when we meet with the engaged couple.

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DEALING WITH QUESTIONS: (Narrator to read this)

- New sponsor couples tend to worry about questions the engaged might ask. Remember, there are just 3 kinds of questions. Here is a guide for each kind.
 1. Information Question: This is a question where someone wants information. You answer the question by drawing on your own knowledge or experience. If you do not know the answer, admit that you don't know the answer and tell them you will make time to find an answer and get back to them. After the session, contact your pastor or another sponsor couple for help.
 2. Clarification Question: Someone asks you to clarify something you said. That's easy - just clarify by rephrasing your answer until you and the person asking the question are "on the same page." (Note this does not mean that you will always agree with one another, but at least the other person knows what you are saying.)
 3. Challenging Question: Very rarely someone will ask a question that challenges or contradicts something in the text of *For Better and For Ever* or something you shared from your experience. If this happens, try to stop and think before you react. Usually the person is testing you, to see how you will react. Rather than arguing with the person, it is better to simply acknowledge that he/she may see something differently because of his/her life experience... and then move on. This avoids getting side tracked into a power struggle. If they strongly disagree with you they are not likely to accept what you have to say anyway.

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SCHEDULING THE SESSIONS

- Usually you contact the engaged couple by phone. You call one of them (maybe even at work) and ask when you can call again to talk with both of them (if possible). They might be living together, but it is best to make no assumption about that. At this point, you merely want to arrange to talk with both of them because you want to introduce yourself and your spouse and explain what you want the engaged couple to do to prepare for the first session at your home. [When we say “talk with both of them,” they may have only one phone, but at least they are in the same room and you can take turns talking with each of them.]

- During this phone conversation you can verify whether the couple has already begun studying *For Better and For Ever*. You can determine with them which chapters they ~ and you and your spouse ~ will prepare to discuss during the first meeting in your home. [This assumes the couple already has *For Better and For Ever*. If they do not have their books, you will need to take care of that first so they can prepare for the first meeting at your home.]

- Direct them to page 7 of *For Better and For Ever* which explains the 3 steps for using the workbook and also offers a suggested grouping of topics for *five* meetings (usually at least one week apart). The three steps are:

- 1 – Study the chapters you agree to cover, such as, Chapter 2 & 3.

- 2 – Write your personal answers to the questions following each chapter in the book. That is why each person needs a personal copy of *For Better and For Ever* to work with.

- 3 – Spend time sharing the written answers in dialogue with your partner. (Point out the difference between “dialogue” and “debate” on page 7.)

- *Explain that this “homework” needs to be done before they come to your home because the meeting in your home is for deeper discussion of the material studied.*

- *Since none of you know how long it will take for the engaged couple to do the homework, advise the engaged couple to call you after they have completed their homework to schedule a date & time to meet with you. This is an effective way to make sure they complete the homework before you meet.*

- *(If you have not heard from them for while)...It is OK to call them to ask how they are doing and how the “homework” is going. But give them time to complete the homework before setting a date for the meeting.*

- After the first meeting, assuming they did the homework, they have some idea of how much time it will take them to do the homework and you might schedule the next meeting with the understanding that you will be in touch with each other a few days before the next meeting to make sure they have had time to complete the homework. (This will allow them the opportunity to tell you that they may need more time to complete the homework.) A key part of the homework is the dialogue and sharing they are expected to do after they complete the writing of their answers. It is much better to re-

schedule the meeting date, rather than try to have the meeting if they have not had time to do this sharing and dialogue.

- When you schedule the date for your sessions, be very specific about what TIME you expect them to arrive at your home and also what TIME you expect to finish the session in your home. Setting a definite time limit of about 2 – 2 ½ hours for the meeting is best for everyone because of family and work responsibilities that you and the engaged couple must also tend to.
- Also tell them that *“because we all have so many things to deal with, we might need to re-schedule a meeting because of some family or job situation. If we have a problem and need to change the meeting date, we will call you...and if you have a problem with the date, you call us.”* The point here is to avoid disrespecting one another by simply not showing up for a meeting.

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FIRST SESSION

- This is it! The night you meet with the engaged couple. Until now, you have talked to them on the telephone or met them at church, but tonight all four of you will begin marriage preparation.
- Getting Ready For The Couple To Arrive: Doing marriage preparation is very important and therefore it is normal to feel some anxiety. Spend some time in prayer while you are waiting for the engaged couple to arrive. Take a few minutes to hold hands and say a short prayer acknowledging the presence of Christ Who will assist you during your time with the engaged couple.
- Be Organized: Make sure the room you are going to use is clean and comfortable. Prepare your notes and the *For Better and For Ever* workbooks and have pens and paper available. Prepare beverages and snacks ahead of time.
- Anxiety is normal! Try to imagine yourself and your spouse going to another couple’s home to discuss your marriage and share personal details of your lives with people you hardly know! Any normal couple would find that intimidating. The engaged couple coming to meet with you does not really know you, yet must go through this process (as a requirement by the Church) to get married. They will surely be anxious! Also, consider all the daily tasks, distractions and preoccupations from work or school that the engaged couple carry with them. Although most couples are enthusiastic about their wedding, often one or both have some reservations about the usefulness of these meetings with a sponsor couple. They may even be thinking your job is to determine whether they should be allowed to marry in the Church.
- So, it is a great challenge for the couple to ring your doorbell the first night. *Welcome them well!* Greet them at the door, as you would greet special guests for the first time. Introduce yourselves and your children, direct them to the place where you are going to have the meeting. Then dismiss your children or put them to bed so you can have privacy with the engaged couple. Now what?

- Getting started. Since you don't know the couple very well, begin with small talk. Progress through the chitchat and gradually direct the conversation to the marriage preparation workbook. There are no hard and fast rules. Just play it by ear. Here are some common questions we ask to help "break the ice."
 - o Did you find your way here okay? Or, were our directions clear?
 - o How about that weather? It's so hot, cold, great for gardening or whatever.
 - o What have you heard about this program?
- We then give them information...such as:
 - o How long each meeting will be (2 – 2 1/2 hours)
 - o How many sessions there will be (usually 5 or 6, we will decide that as we work through the book)
 - o Where the bathroom is.
 - o If they smoke – Explain any rules you have about smoking in your home.
- Ask the couple about themselves. For example:
 - o Where they met.
 - o How long they have been going together.
 - o What attracted them to each other?
- Tell them a little bit about yourselves:
 - o How long you have been married
 - o Where you met
 - o How many children you have
 - o How long you have been doing marriage preparation
 - o Why you are part of this ministry
- Discussing the Homework with the engaged: Once you have "broken the ice", turn your attention to *For Better and For Ever*. By the way, *it is assumed the couple brought their books with them*. If for some reason they forgot to bring them, you will need to deal with that right away. Unless they can easily go get them and return quickly, it's probably best to spend this first session just getting to know each other. Then schedule another meeting...when they will have their books with them. Without judging or scolding them, you want to make it clear that you simply cannot do the sessions if they don't complete their homework and bring their books with them to the sessions.

· Add value to the process of doing the homework by asking about their experience preparing: studying the chapters (how long did this take?), writing personal answers to the questions (was this easy or difficult?), spending time sharing the written answers and dialoguing together as explained on page 7 (how did you experience the process of trying to understand one another, rather than trying to prove who had the right answer?). Point out that the program begins very simply with the couple sharing details about how they grew up, the home they came from, their family life, and the traditions they learned from their families. Explain that by the third session they will be dealing with communication, and moving toward a more intimate level of dialogue.

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THE FOUR RULES. (J&J Narrate this) We tell every couple that this program is designed to respect the engaged couple and to make the sessions a “safe” place to be, thanks to four very important rules: (These are written in *For Better and For Ever*, Appendix B, Ideas for Sponsor Couples)

1. Rule #1: Our goal is to encourage you to be the best couple you can be. It is not to get you to be like us!
2. Rule #2: The Right To Pass – Each of us has the right to say we do not want to talk about a specific issue. This reduces the intimidation factor. In our experience, no one has ever felt the need to hold anything back, but stating this rule shows respect for a person's boundaries.
3. Rule #3: Confidentiality – What is said in this room, stays in this room. Having said that, what happens if you identify issues that your pastor should know about?
 - a. Remember your job! It is not your job to decide whether the couple is ready for the challenges of Christian marriage. Keep in mind that all the couples you sponsor are “adults.” This does not mean they are going to be successful in dealing with the challenges of Christian marriage, but it does mean that they have a right to take on this responsibility. Your job is to “coach,” that is, to encourage and try to motivate them to learn the skills they will need to be successful.
 - b. When you function as a sponsor couple, it is also important to remember that you are *NOT* professional therapists. If you happen to be a professional therapist, it is important to set aside your professional status when you agree to function with your spouse as a sponsor couple. If a couple you are meeting with says something that gives you reason to be concerned about the future health of their relationship, you can offer your opinion and suggest they take a careful look at this issue, but that is the end of your responsibility. It is not your job to “fix” their situation and it is not appropriate for you to report this information to the pastor (behind their backs). You could, however, recommend they talk with the pastor (or some other professional) about an issue that concerns you. The bottom line is that it is very important to honour Rule #3: “What is said in this room, stays in this room.”

- c. But ~ having said all of this ~ if the couple did share something with you that you thought was very important for the pastor to know about, then you would share your thoughts/concerns with the engaged couple and advise them *“to share this information with your pastor because we think he really needs to know this information.”* Having done that, your responsibility is finished, you have done all that you can do because you have alerted them to their responsibility as adults to take the information to the pastor.
4. Rule #4: When our sessions are completed we send you back to your pastor. We make no judgement or report about you. That is not our role. - Remember to honour these four rules at all times. Your marriage preparation sessions will benefit as a result.

· It’s possible that by now (on this first evening) we have been with the couple about an hour and not yet done an opening prayer or begun working through the workbooks. It is very common for us to spend half the first night introducing ourselves, learning a little about the couple, and only having a little time to get into the content of the books. We encourage you to follow this example. Don’t rush. Your guest couple will become relaxed and the whole experience will be more enjoyable.

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INTRODUCING THE CANDLE & PRAYER.

· In your book there is a section in Appendix B with specific prayers that you will use at the beginning and end of each session (unless you prefer to pray spontaneously). These prayers follow the theme of the sessions, and they include passages from the Bible. These Bible texts are written in *For Better and For Ever* so you can easily identify them, but it is best for the person who is going to read the Scripture passage to read from a real Bible. Make sure that your Bible is nearby and the page is already book marked.

· Using a candle during the time of prayer adds another wonderful element to the prayer. Before you begin the Opening Prayer, you can say something like: *“This candle reminds us that Jesus is the Light of our lives. Tonight we want this candle to reminds us that ~ as Christian married couples ~ we are called by God to love one another in a way that shines out and makes a positive different on other people.”* [Note. The use of “we” here includes the engaged couple who is preparing to live up to the responsibilities of Christian marriage! Use additional words, if necessary, to make sure this point is made.]

· After the Opening Prayer is finished, you can blow out the candle (and then invite the engaged couple to light the candle ~ again ~ before the Closing Prayer) OR you can let the candle burn throughout the session as a reminder that Jesus is present all through the evening (not just when you formally “pray”). The not-so-hidden agenda, of course, is to teach the engage couple rituals of prayer that they can do for themselves.

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DIALOGUE / DISCUSSION WITH THE ENGAGED COUPLE:

- During your sessions with the engaged, focus on your highlighted material, and then invite them to share with you the text and questions that they found most important or challenging. You want to assist the engaged couple to:

- o Identify any question or issue about which they have different ideas. Your experience will be helpful in explaining how important it is to learn to deal with differences in positive / constructive ways.

- o In addition to the text of *For Better and For Ever*, you will want to study the “Key Concepts” document (See the web site, go to Free Stuff). This will be useful in identifying topics or issues that the engaged couple may have simply not thought much about. For example: learning to dialogue about sensitive topics like Money or Family Planning or Intimacy or Prayer as a couple.

- As you gain more experience as a sponsor couple, you will become more skilled in asking “open-ended questions” which may encourage them to share even more than they wrote in their books or shared previously with one another.

- You will also begin to notice their strengths/weaknesses in dialogue and listening:

- o Perhaps you notice that one of them has a tendency to speak “for” the other person (rather than giving the other person time to speak his/her own thoughts).

- o Or you might notice that one or both of them are not “listening” (but only trying to argue his/her point of view).

You could bring these to the attention of the engaged couple and share you own experience of learning ~ perhaps from you own painful experience ~ why it is important to practice good listening skills in marriage.

- You will never have time to cover every question during your session with the engaged couple. That is why you focus on the text and the questions that seem most important to you and to the engaged couple.

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DEALING WITH UNEXPECTED CHALLENGES:

- New sponsor couples can worry about the engaged couple bringing up a topic or issue that the sponsor couple does not know how to deal with. For example, what would you do with these situations?

- o Someone mentions they come from an alcoholic family.

- o She cries at something he says or how he says it.

- o One says something rude or aggressive to the other: “That’s stupid! You can’t believe that.”

- The best way to deal with anything the engaged might say or do is to have a clear concept of your role as a sponsor couple. Remember you are NOT their therapist, nor their pastor, nor their parents. Your commitment is to journey with them as their “sponsors” and that means you are willing to listen to them and to share your own experience with them. Your job is NOT to “fix” anything.
- In most situations, the “fail safe” thing to do is NOTHING more than LISTEN.
- o If she cries or he gets upset, you can simply listen and be present to them.
- o If someone mentions an alcoholic family or abuse in the family, you can listen and then ask them what they think they need to do (and offer your ideas *only if/when they ask for your ideas!*).
- o If someone says something harsh or aggressive to the other, you can keep quiet and listen to see how they will deal with the situation. When they have calmed down, you can ask how each of them felt during their aggressive exchanges with one another. They may ask for your ideas about how to handle conflicts more constructively.
- The only behavior that you must deal with is if they refuse to prepare for the sessions properly. If, after you have explained the importance of preparing for the sessions, they refuse to do their part, then you simply report this to the Coordinating Couple or the pastor. The pastor or Coordinating Couple will deal with the couple and your responsibility is finished.

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RESOURCES

- Your most important resource is your personal experience of dealing with one another as a married couple. The engaged couple can read books about how to relate to another as a married couple, just as they can study books about how to play golf well. However, studying about golf and being motivated to do well will never make you a Tiger Woods. Likewise, studying about marriage and all the good intentions in the world will not provide the skills to deal with your spouse in difficult situations. However, when a sponsor couple shares the experience of struggling with one another and learning the often painful and difficult lessons of dealing with each other in new ways...that is more likely to communicate the motivation to learn and practice the needed skills.
- If you have not already taken part in a Marriage Encounter Weekend, take the initiative to find out about this experience which has help thousands of couples change an “OK” marriage into the kind of healthy marriage they always wanted to live in. For information see www.wwme.org.
- Another resource is the experience of other sponsor couples. Take full advantage of sharing their experiences by taking part in special meetings for sponsor couples which will be scheduled twice each year at your church.
- Set up a resource library in your church for sponsor couples and those planning to get married. Some of the material you should consider using includes:

- o Books on *praying as a couple*.
- o Communication and relationship material.
- o Related periodicals and articles
- o A Video on *Preparing Cohabiting Couples For Marriage* by Sister Barbara Markey [See www.foccusinc.com. Unfortunately this is currently available only in English.] This video will help your team to understand the potential issues cohabitating couples face.
- o You can also look at Appendix A, in the Resource section of *For Better and For Ever*. This will direct you to excellent books and web sites.
- o And, of course, this video, with copies of the *For Better and For Ever* workbook. Remember you can copy the text of this video from www.marriagepreparation.com. (See Free Stuff. >> Resources for Pastor & Church Staff)
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A TYPICAL SESSION WITH THE ENGAGED:

You are now set to go through your sessions with the engaged couple. Here is a brief outline of how a typical evening will unfold.

Greet The Couple: ...

Open With Prayer: ...

Review Previous Session: (after the first session) ...

Discuss Homework: (remember to use “open ended questions”) ...

Break: ...

Further Discussion of Homework: ...

Closing Prayer: ...

Planning For Next Session: ...

Once you have done your first session, you will find the following sessions will flow quite naturally.

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FOLLOW UP:

Please make a personal commitment to Follow Up with the couple after they are married. Before you complete the final session, plan with them how to deal with the follow up questions for 3 months and 6 months into their marriage. It is more challenging if they move far away from where you live, but

letters, email and phone calls are ways that sponsor couples have used to effectively follow up with the newly married couple.

Here are some additional options to consider:

- Meet them at church for Sunday worship and share breakfast after church.
- Introduce them to other married couples of the parish.
- Pray with them, and pray for them...and let them know you are praying for them!
- Plan to share a meal with the couple, either at your home or at their home.
- Ask them to show you their wedding photos.
- Include them in your Christmas card list. Send them an anniversary card each year.
- If they live apart from their own families, invite them to your family celebrations.
- Try to be available for invitations to their family celebrations, such as, the baptism of children.

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CONCLUSION OF VIDEO ONE:

- Now that you listened to and observed this video presentation, we hope that you have a basic understanding of how to function as a sponsor couple.
- If you have not already done this, we strongly recommend that you copy and print, “Key Concepts” which is available (free) on the web site at www.marriagepreparation.com (See Free Stuff). This document will give you further information about the content of each chapter of *For Better and For Ever*.
- If you have any questions about how to function as a sponsor couple or whether you and your spouse are suited for this ministry, talk with your pastor or the Coordinating Couple who is in charge of the program in your church. As for questions about how to set up the program in your church, check out the web site at www.marriagepreparation.com and look for:
 - o The video resource: “How to set up a marriage preparation program in your church.”
 - o The Resource Team on the web site. Contact the person who speaks Spanish.
- We hope that tells you everything you need to know as you prepare for what thousands of sponsor couple have discovered to be a most satisfying adventure. While most couples become sponsor couples because they have been asked to assist engaged couples of their church; most experienced sponsor couples will tell you they continue with this ministry because their conversations with engaged couples provide a constant renewal for their own marriage.

~ THE END ~

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