

‘Five awesome date nights’: Marriage in Christ seminars coming to more parishes

Jessica Trygstad | February 7, 2018 | 0 Comments



Matt and Mary Brickweg with their daughters Madeline, 3, Veronica, 2, and Gianna, 8 months. Courtesy Mary Brickweg

Fresh off marriage preparation and perhaps the honeymoon cruise ship, most newlyweds aren't inclined to think about marriage enrichment programs. But that's what Mary and Matt Brickweg did three years into their marriage when they participated in Marriage in Christ.

"The seminar came at the most perfect time for us because we were on the cusp of some major transitions," said Mary, 29.

When the parishioners of St. Joseph in West St. Paul began the five-week seminar in 2016, they had two young daughters, and Mary was pregnant with their third. She was working part-time as a nurse and planning to become a stay-at-home mother upon their daughter's birth. Meanwhile, Matt, 30, was pursuing a new full-time job.

"Especially for us, having three young children [and] life being busy from that perspective, it was a helpful refocus and a reminder of what we signed up for in marriage vows," Mary

said. “It was so helpful to re-establish a strong foundation before all the changes happened. It felt like five awesome date nights.”

With a new collaboration between Eagan-based Marriage in Christ and the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis’ Office of Marriage, Family and Life, more married couples have the opportunity to attend a Marriage in Christ seminar, which are for all married couples. This year, 11 parishes plan to host seminars — All Saints in Lakeville, Epiphany in Coon Rapids, Nativity of Our Lord in St. Paul, Nativity of Mary in Bloomington, St. John the Baptist in Savage, St. John Neumann in Eagan, St. Joseph in West St. Paul, St. Maximilian Kolbe in Delano, St. Michael in Farmington, St. Paul in Ham Lake and St. Timothy in Maple Lake.

As part of the two-year pilot program, which officially launched in September, donors made it possible to provide the seminar at reduced fees to 400 couples married five years or fewer. The program also includes training host couples in 20 parishes and then hosting seminars at those parishes. Thirty-five host couples were trained in the program last fall. The collaboration is a direct response to Pope Francis’ 2016 apostolic exhortation “Amoris Laetitia” (“The Joy of Love”).

“As we were taking a look at the culture of marriage and the best way that we can support family and marriage in our archdiocese, we realized that the newly married were underserved, and we took a look at that and asked how we can best help young marriages find strength and stability,” said Jean Stolpestad, director of the Office of Marriage, Family and Life. “It’s basically: How do you make these two persons — these two individuals — into one flesh, one heart, one discipline? And Marriage in Christ gives them some basic tools to help them start down that road.”

The seminar seeks to help couples make Jesus the center of their lives and strengthen their friendship by equipping them with practical skills to develop good communication and prayer habits.

“There’s a hunger to do something for marriage, and this incorporates the best of our [Catholic] teaching with the practical advice of how to make the grace of the sacrament come alive,” said Bill Wacker, who founded Marriage in Christ with his wife of 43 years, Adella, in 2010. “Without the power of the Holy Spirit, that’s really difficult.”

Marriage in Christ is a ministry of People of Praise Christian Community, a charismatic and ecumenical community with 22 locations in the U.S., Canada and Caribbean. Its Minnesota branch is in Eagan. As members of the community, the Wackers and a core team of five other couples piloted the program in 2011 at their parish, St. John Neumann in Eagan. Since then, they’ve trained couples in 15 states with more than 1,000 couples in the seminar nationwide.

“We knew that the key to a really good marriage is to have your priorities straight — that is, God has to be first, then our spouse has to be second, our children third, and then after that, everything else has to take a number,” said Wacker, retired headmaster of Trinity School at River Ridge in Eagan. He and Adella have five children and three grandchildren.

The two-hour weekly sessions run for five consecutive weeks either at a parish or a host couple’s home and follow a format of a large-group discussion, a video, small-group discussions (men with men and women with women) and a recap at the end. Some seminars offer child care, making the program more accessible for younger couples.

Brickweg and her husband met with about 10 other couples at St. Bonaventure in Bloomington. She said the “meat” of the seminar was the daily homework to “pray, talk, act.” Because they had known each other growing up, they were surprised by how helpful the conversation-starter questions were — “What was one of the musical or athletic highlights of your high school career?” — and they discussed the topics during supper or while doing dishes.

The conversation starters help couples talk about their pre-children memories and passions, Wacker explained.

“Because the more we know about someone, the more we love,” Wacker said. “You can’t love somebody you don’t know. We’re mysteries — always learning and changing. It’s important to keep revealing ourselves. That’s a delight and joy that gets rekindled.”

Brickweg said the conversations have enriched their marriage.

“I think we grew in friendship, too,” she said. “The seminar itself is all about forming good habits and gives [us] real, practical tools to build those habits. A huge one is praying together, and praying together every day.” She added that they’ve been successful in their resolve to pray together before they go to bed.

Wacker said because many couples don’t know how to pray together, the seminar includes a simple meditation with elements from Scripture and Liturgy of the Hours. He said Marriage in Christ differs from other marriage programs in that it focuses on the practical skills of praying, talking and acting, and the role of the Holy Spirit — and going through it with other couples.

Brickweg, who with her husband is a member of People of Praise, appreciated being connected with longtime couples and seeing the normalcy in “human squabbles.” Her discussion leader had been married for at least 50 years, she said, and shared about her marriage’s joys and struggles.

“In the way she talked about her husband, their lifetime of loving each other was really beautiful,” Brickweg said. “It was helpful to see couples who can love each other so clearly and be able to share that — it’s something to aspire to. No matter who you are, there are going to be struggles in marriage at each stage.”

Find a Marriage in Christ seminar

Visit <http://www.marriageinchrist.com/events>. For more information about becoming part of the initiative, contact Emily Hayden at 612-281-3362 or haydene@archspm.org.