

A marriage preparation program



A Decision *to* Love

{ LEADER'S GUIDE }

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Introduction

Welcome to the leader's guide of *A Decision to Love*. Because you are part of a marriage preparation team, you have a deep concern for the health and well-being of the engaged couple's future marriage. You are investing your time, talent, and emotional and psychological energy into this. It's a big investment, but the returns are priceless.

You will find that being part of a marriage preparation process can be exciting, stimulating, beautiful, exhausting, frustrating, and scary. It's exciting to observe a young couple discover something new about themselves. It's stimulating to your own relationships to have other married couples give talks on communication skills and other topics. It's beautiful to have an engaged couple thank you at the end of a program for what you've done for them. It's exhausting to have to leave home on an evening or weekend, arrange for a sitter, rush off to church at the end of a long day to be with couples who may not want to be there in the first place. It's frustrating when the program doesn't run as well as you think it should. And it's scary to see what impact your words may have on the engaged couples who hear them.

A Decision to Love

This workbook is entitled *A Decision to Love* be-

cause we believe that loving and being loved is a decision. Real love is not something that just happens once and never changes. Rather, because we are always growing and changing, our love has to grow and change. Keeping that love alive and renewed demands much from us: First, it demands a commitment to our love; second, it demands a belief that the love is worthwhile; and finally, it demands a decision to continue loving, even when we may not feel lovable or may not feel like loving anyone.

God's decision to create, sustain, and love us is the model of all love, which is to love unconditionally and fully. Jesus is our model in this; he walked among us, and taught us through his example about love. As married couples, we are called to this kind of love and to this kind of decision. Jesus' life and love have challenged us to learn to give love to our partners with the fullness and depth that we are loved by God.

Leader's Guide

This leader's guide that accompanies the engaged couple's edition is meant to assist you in running a marriage preparation program. It includes (in reduced form) all the pages found in the engaged couple's book as well as further suggestions on run-

ning a program. It also contains exercises that are not in the couple's edition. Since this edition is also meant to be a planning guide, we have included notes to assist you with the planning of your marriage preparation program.

Purpose of Marriage Preparation

Why have you volunteered to help couples prepare for their marriage? Your answer to this question will be personal, but it has to include the fact that the overall purpose for marriage preparation is to help couples prepare for a marital relationship that will be a life-giving journey of love, hope, and faith. As the title of this workbook indicates, we believe marriage is based on a decision that a couple makes to love each other. This decision is not made once and for all, but is an on-going, growing, and maturing decision that has to be reaffirmed every day in the couple's life together.

Engaged couples typically are so romantically "in love" with each other that they are not initially receptive to the idea of love as a decision. They may think it just "happens" to them. They see love purely as an emotion, which at this time in their lives is overflowing. In this workbook we attempt to affirm this, but also to encourage them to move beyond that stage and mature in their love.

Flexibility of Workbook

A Decision to Love is designed to fit into any new or existing marriage preparation program. It is not designed as an entire program in itself; thus it allows you greater flexibility to meet the needs of the program that you may already be running in your parish or diocese. Later in this volume, for those who are just beginning a program or looking for new ideas in an existing one, we suggest ways to run a marriage preparation program.

If you decide to use *A Decision to Love* in your already existing program, we suggest that you carefully select from it the chapters and the material in each chapter that you intend to use in your program. There are in this book eight chapters, a wedding liturgy planning section, information boxes of useful information, and a resource appendix that cover much more material than the typical marriage preparation program allows for. Encourage your engaged couples

to complete, on their own at a later time, whatever material you do not cover in your program.

His Pages and Her Pages

In all the chapters of *A Decision to Love*, you will find a His Page and a Her Page, with the same questions in each. Allow enough time for each person to answer the questions on his or her page and to discuss their answers together. These pages should be removed from the couple's book to allow each the opportunity to answer the questions privately. The couple should then confer with each other, comparing their answers.

Some questions are open-ended, requiring answers of some length; some are closed-ended, requiring short answers: multiple choice, true or false, and fill-ins. This variety is intentional, since every individual will prefer one style over another. Marriage preparation coordinators across the country have reported that people in marriage preparation programs are about evenly divided in their preference.

If the amount of time available during your program is a concern, consider assigning only the short-answer and multiple choice questions to the couples. They should be encouraged, however, to answer the remaining questions later on their own.

Case Studies and Group Discussions

You will find various group questions and case studies throughout *A Decision to Love*, including several "baby cases" in Chapter 6. We have found case studies to be useful in small group discussions. If you decide to use the material in this way, here are a few suggestions.

First, in leading a small group discussion on a case study, the golden rule is that there are no wrong answers. A good case study is open to interpretation, analysis, and an exchange of opinions. Correcting someone when he or she expresses an opinion will discourage any further desire to share an opinion. Allow a free flow of possibilities for each case study. If your small group seems to reach a premature "solution," they should be challenged to look at other possibilities.

Another point to remember in your small group discussions is that no one should ever be pressured into saying something. You can encourage a quiet in-

dividual to speak by a friendly glance or nod. Or you may ask a non-threatening, open-ended question in order to elicit some response. In any event, respect their desire to be silent, if that is their choice.

Questionnaires and Exercises

There are various questionnaires, exercises, and ice-breakers found in the couple's edition and this leader's edition. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 in particular offer a variety of resources you can offer the couples in your program.

Information Boxes

A feature of *A Decision to Love* is the many information boxes found throughout the book, featuring topics such as cohabitation, AIDS, pre-marital counseling, dual-career couples, interfaith marriages, co-dependency, alcoholism and addictions, fighting, in-laws, remarriage, divorce, jealousy, spouse abuse, living with parents and natural family planning. These brief information boxes may serve as discussion starters, thought provokers, and supplemental aides to presentations given in your marriage preparation program. The table of contents lists all of these boxes and the page where each one may be found.

Issues of Special Focus

In the couple's edition you will also find boxes with questions targeted for couples with special issues to deal with, such as pregnancy, previous marriage, stepchildren, significant age difference, and older couples. There is no specific space given in the workbook for writing answers to these special focus questions. During your program, encourage the engaged to read these questions and, during the breaks or on their own time, discuss any that may pertain to them.

Relationship Check

Each chapter ends with a relationship check. It is important for engaged couples to get an over-all assessment of how they feel after each chapter's topic. Stress the importance of this exercise. Couples are often amazed that after a certain topic is covered, one of the two of them may not be comfortable with their answers and discussions and may want to pursue the subject further. A glance back over the chap-

ters at the end of the program will highlight for the engaged couples the topics that may still need work.

Planning of the Wedding Liturgy

A section on planning the wedding liturgy is also included in the couple's edition. If time and interest allow, it is often a good idea to go through this with the engaged couples. Most of them have never participated in planning a liturgy before, and they may be feeling somewhat lost and overwhelmed at this time. This is a good opportunity for you to get couples thinking about their wedding day and how their liturgy will be a symbol, an expression, of their Christian marriage.

All prayers, responses, and reading options for the ceremony are presented in the planning section, including two copies of the Planning Sheet (a draft copy and a final copy) so the couple can prepare a final list of all the decisions they make regarding their wedding ceremony.

Resource Appendix

The last information found in this workbook is an extensive listing of self-help and referral resources. During an encounter such as a marriage preparation program, some individuals will come upon personal issues in their lives that they may want assistance dealing with. This resource list offers national 800, or hotline, numbers, addresses, and Web sites of groups they may be interested in. If you observe that a couple appears unusually troubled by a presentation or exercise, you may want to simply ask if everything is all right and make yourself available to them before or after the program or during breaks. If it's appropriate, you may wish to refer them to a professional. No marriage preparation team couple is ever asked to take on a role they are not qualified to assume. We also recommend that you have local numbers for these groups or for professionals in case a couple requests assistance.

Certificates

At the completion of any marriage preparation program, certificates should be administered as (1) a way for the couple to verify their participation and completion of the program to their parish priest

or minister, (2) a way of acknowledging the effort and investment they made in the program, and (3) a tangible sign to the couple that their engagement is something important to you, the team, and the church. See pages 5 and 6 for examples.

If you do not already have a design for your marriage preparation certificate, you may want to choose one of the following models. We recommend you photocopy them on colored, heavy paper.

Ice-Breakers

We suggest you start a marriage preparation program with some type of warm-up exercise. If your program has several sessions, consider having such an exercise at the beginning of each session if time permits. Some of the exercises listed throughout the couple's edition and leader's edition may be used in such a capacity. Or you may want to use the following exercises.

1. Who's Married to Whom? (*for large group; beginning of program*) Have all the team preparation couples stand up front, men on one side in a row, women on the other side. Have the engaged couples attempt to match up the partners, or have each small group attempt it and then see which small group had the most correct. Make sure that none of the engaged see any of the team members standing with their spouse.

2. Couple to Couple (*small group ice-breaker*) Have two engaged couples interview each other, and then introduce each other to the other couples in the group. Each should find out the following information from the other couple: their names, town(s) of residence, wedding date, honeymoon plans, their favorite pastime as a couple, and the like.

3. Is That Me? (*small group ice-breaker*) Have each person write on a piece of paper their partner's:

- favorite color
- favorite season of the year
- favorite sport or hobby
- favorite song
- eye color
- whether their big toe is longer than the toe next to it

The papers are then handed in to each small group team leader, without names on them and without their partners seeing the answers. The team leader then mixes them up, and reads them out loud one at a time. Each person is then to guess which of the set of answers describes them.

Suggestions for Conducting a Marriage Preparation Program

Most dioceses and churches have well formulated policies and procedures regarding the marriage preparation process within their boundaries. That is why *A Decision to Love* is a flexible workbook, adaptable to most pre-existing programs, and not a prepackaged program in itself. There is no need to re-invent the wheel if you already have a smooth running marriage preparation structure in place. If, however, you are looking for ways to improve your marriage preparation program or if you are in fact just initiating such a program, we offer the following ideas for your consideration.

Basic Marriage Preparation Structure

The basic cycle of most pre-Cana programs consists of a presentation on a given topic by a trained married couple (team couple), followed by an exercise or worksheet for each engaged couple to do and discuss among themselves, followed by a small group exercise. This cycle is repeated, each time focusing on a different topic such as communication, spirituality and religion, finances, and sexuality. This cycle can and should be mixed with various ice-breakers, group exercises, and couple exercises.

Two models for a marriage preparation program using *A Decision to Love* are suggested on pages 8-9.

We encourage you to have the engaged couples sit in small group circles of four or five couples, plus one team couple. This serves three purposes: (1) such an arrangement is better for a more informal and warm atmosphere as opposed to having an auditorium style arrangement; (2) it allows for potentially greater interaction between couples and at least one of the team couples; (3) small group interaction complements the presentations and couple interaction that the engaged are experiencing in your program.

This is to certify that

and

(bride)

(groom)

have completed

A Decision to Love

marriage preparation program.

(date)

(coordinator / priest)

Certification

and

(bride)

(groom)

have completed the
marriage preparation for

(diocese / parish / agency)

(date)

(coordinator / priest)

Use name tags during the program. Couples may complain or joke about this kind of “labeling,” but the tags help in developing a sense of connectedness and involvement in the program.

A fitting way to end your marriage preparation program is with some type of prayer service. We offer a sample service later in this workbook.

Presentations

Most marriage preparation programs incorporate presentations by the team couples on the following or similar topics: communication, dealing with disagreements, spirituality and religion, finances, and sexuality. These are the core topics to be covered in any program. You will find outlines for these at the end of Chapters 2, 5, 7, 8. Beyond these, you may want to consider having presentations on the following: family of origin, personality differences,

natural family planning, children and parenting, wedding liturgy planning.

Ideally, a presentation is given by one of the team couples, and should last no longer than twenty minutes. The key to a successful talk is for the team couples to be well prepared, relaxed, and genuine. Do not pretend to be something you aren't, or to know something you don't. Be yourself! The talk should reflect your own lived experience as a married couple, struggling and loving through life. You don't have to be a “pro” on the subject you're presenting.

A presenting couple wins over the engaged couples if they state at the beginning of their talk words similar to the following: “We're not professionals. We don't have all the answers. But we are a married couple who cares. We're here to share with you some of our experiences and insights on the subject of...”

One-Day Marriage Preparation Program

(Model 1)

- 9:00 AM Registration. Coffee and donuts
9:30 Welcome. Opening prayer. Introductions of team members

Use of an ice-breaker (“Who’s Married to Whom?” for example). Explanation of the purpose of the program. Odds and ends (location of bathrooms, smoking policy, etc.)

- 10:00 Small group ice-breaker, or blind partner exercise
10:20 Couple exercise: *A Decision to Love*, pages 7-10 (Chapter 1)
10:40 Presentation by team couple: Communication
11:00 Break
11:10 Couple exercise: *A Decision to Love*, pages 15-18 (Chapter 2)
11:30 Small group exercise: *A Decision to Love*, Case Study, page 14 (Chapter 2)
- 12:10 PM Lunch
- 12:45 Couple exercise: *A Decision to Love*. Engaged couple chooses one of the exercises and/or sets of questions from Chapters 3 and 4.
1:15 Presentation by team couple: Sexuality
1:35 Couple exercise: *A Decision to Love*, pages 51-54 (Chapter 5)
1:55 Break
2:00 Small group questions: *A Decision to Love*, page 55 (Chapter 5) and/or small group baby cases, page 63 (Chapter 6)
2:45 Presentation: Finances
3:05 Break, snacks
3:20 Couple pages: *A Decision to Love*, pages 69-73 (Chapter 7)
3:55 Presentation: Spirituality
4:15 Couple pages: *A Decision to Love*, pages 79-82
4:40 Small group exercises: *A Decision to Love*, page 83
5:00 Prayer service
5:30 Dinner (optional)

Three-Evening Marriage Preparation Program

(Model 2)

First Evening

- 6:45 PM Registration
- 7:00 Welcome. Opening prayer. Introductions of team couples.
Explanation of the purpose and procedures of the program. Odds and ends
- 7:15 Small group ice-breaker
- 7:30 His and Her Pages: *A Decision to Love*, pages 7-10 (Chapter 1)
- 7:45 Small group discussion questions: page 11 (Chapter 1)
- 8:00 Presentation by team couple: Communication
- 8:20 His and Her Pages: *A Decision to Love*, pages 15-18 (Chapter 2)
- 8:35 Break
- 8:40 Small group exercise: *A Decision to Love*, Case Study, page 14
and group section questions: page 19
- 9:00 Presentation by team couple: Personalities and Separate Pasts
- 9:15 Couple exercise: *A Decision to Love*, pages 25-32 (Chapter 3)
- 9:30 Closing remarks

Second Evening

- 7:00 PM Welcome back. Old business
- 7:05 Presentation: Family of Origin
- 7:25 His and Her Pages: *A Decision to Love*, pages 41-44 (Chapter 4)
- 7:40 Small group exercise: Case study, page 45
- 7:55 Break
- 8:00 Presentation: Sexuality
- 8:20 His and Her Pages, pages 51-54 (Chapter 5)
- 8:40 Presentation: Children
- 9:00 His and Her Pages: pages 59-62 (Chapter 6)
- 9:15 Small group exercise: Baby cases, page 63
- 9:30 Closing remarks

Third Evening

- 7:00 PM Welcome back. Old business
- 7:05 Presentation: Finances
- 7:25 His and Her Pages: pages 69-72 and Our Section, page 73 (Chapter 7)
- 7:45 Presentation: Spirituality
- 8:05 His and Her Pages: pages 79-82 (Chapter 8)
- 8:25 Break
- 8:30 Planning the wedding liturgy
- 8:50 Evaluations and questions
- 9:00 Prayer service
- 9:30 Closing remarks

Concluding Prayer Service

REQUIREMENTS Small white taper candles, one per person; large white pillar candle (possibly the church's Paschal Candle) placed up front

Priest/Team Couple Lord Jesus, you have told us that whenever two or more are gathered in your name, that you are there with them. *(Pause)* Lord, we thank you for the gift of love. We thank you for this opportunity to come together, in love, to find out more about ourselves and you. We ask you to strengthen us as a couple, in your love. This we ask through you, our Lord.

All Amen.

Reader An appropriate Scripture reading; for example:
John 17:20–23 Matthew 22:35–40 John 2:1–11
John 15:9–12 1 John 4:7–12 1 Corinthians 12:31–13:8

Priest/Team Couple *(Instructing the engaged couples with words similar to the following)* For our unity candle ceremony, we ask that one person from each small group come up to the Paschal Candle, light his or her candle, and return to the group where the others will light their candle from that one.

Dim the room lights and light the large Paschal Candle. Distribute the small taper candles to each group, one per person.

Priest/Team Couple *(as the Paschal Candle is lit)* Lord Jesus, you are the light of the world. Come into our lives and show us the way.

Pause. Briefly invite the group representative to come forward to light his or her candle and then return to light the candles of the group members.

MUSIC During this part of the ceremony, some appropriate music should be played in the background. A soft instrumental piece works well or a gentle hymn from a Christian musician such as John Michael Talbot, The St. Louis Jesuits, David Haas, Weston Priory.

Priest/Team Couple *(After the song and every candle is lit)* In the midst of the darkness of our daily problems and stresses, God softly comes to us as a light of hope and love. Our God is a God of gentleness, of humor, of invitation, of embracing. May we follow our God and build our relationship on hope, love, gentleness, and humor. *(Pause)*

Come, Lord Jesus, and light our path. For the journey of marriage is long and sometimes dark, but we are filled with hope because you are with us in our life together.

Turn the room lights back on. Briefly instruct the couples to blow out their candles. Keep the Paschal Candle lit.

Priest/Team Couple Now let us join hands and pray in the words that our Savior taught us...

All Our Father, who art in heaven....