



Third Option smoothes marriage's rough spots

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Erik and Laura Christian have been married more than nine years, have three children, and are clearly in love.

But love alone cannot prevent all of their problems, and frustration sent them to their pastor, the Rev. Allen Pickett, of Knapp Street Reformed Church.

Pickett referred them to Third Option, a new church-based marriage program with mentoring at its core. Volunteer mentors serve as living examples of how couples can get through the tough times and come out strong.

The Christians attended all 14 sessions of a Third Option cycle, and say what they learned there has been invaluable.

"I'm not the only one out there like me," said Laura Christian. "We're not all on our own little island."

Erik Christian was reminded of something crucial: He is responsible for his actions alone, and if his wife is reacting emotionally every time he brings up a certain topic, maybe he should rethink his approach.

Laura said she is moved that the volunteers cared so much about supporting their relationship.

"For people to support us and be positive about marriage, that is awesome, because you need that," she said.

For the first session, like all newcomers, the Christians sat down with a mentor couple, who told their own marriage story, warts and all. Erik and Laura said they were blown away by how candid their mentors were about their troubles, and how their marriage survived.

"That was really amazing to me that people can come back from such large issues. It's cool to see how the Lord works," Laura said.

When it began

Third Option came to West Michigan in November 2006 when the program's creator, Pat Ennis, came to speak at a marriage and family-building lecture series for pastors and clinicians, according to Ryan Jaarsma, executive director of the Pine Rest Family Institute.

Local pastors got excited about it and decided to collaborate. Knapp Street Reformed, Thornapple Evangelical Covenant Church and Calvary Church joined forces, and in March 2007 the first sessions were offered.

The sessions are the first and third Thursdays of every month from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at Thornapple Evangelical Covenant Church, 6595 Cascade Road SE, and are free of charge. Child care is provided upon request.

"The unusual aspect of Third Option is it's ongoing," said Pickett.

Many marriage programs are weekend retreats, or short-term workshops. Third Option consists of 14 workshop sessions. Couples are not required to attend each one, but can drop in as they are able.

The "Third Option" refers to a place between "his way" and "her way," a middle road between two potentially extreme points of view.

The workshops are available to any couple, regardless of church or religious affiliation, who feel their marriage could use some strengthening or maintenance. Cohabiting, non-married couples also are welcome; no one asks for those details, say the volunteers. One spouse could even come alone, though it's not ideal.

Those couples embroiled in serious crises -- such as drug or alcohol abuse, or violence in the relationship -- should seek professional counseling, say the facilitators. The volunteers are not therapists.

"If one person is extremely hostile to each other, or there is potential for abuse, it's not going to be a good fit," said Jaarsma. "But for most couples who are experiencing some marital difficulties, it is a good fit."

Third Option sessions are not meant to apply pressure. Couples are not required to say anything. If need be, the mentor couples and facilitators will do all the talking.

The facilitators and mentor couples say most people do eventually open up and participate. There is often laughter, and plenty of sharing. Erik Christian said he was amazed at how close he felt to the facilitators and mentors.

"They know things about you that not a lot of people do, so there's a comfort in that," Erik said.

Lessons learned

On subsequent visits, the facilitator will spend the first hour reviewing the previous week's session and whatever work the couple has done in the meantime. The second hour focuses on the new lesson for the week. For example, a recent lesson focused on expectations and how unmet expectations feel like rejection.

The volunteers are enthusiastic about the program's value. Terry and Kathy Shoemaker are one of the mentor couples who open up a traumatic chapter of their marriage to strangers as part of the Third Option process.

"You really kind of have to have a passion for it," said Terry Shoemaker. "Because you're going to tell things about yourself and your relationship you're not proud of. The people who do need help relate to the people who have been through it."

The volunteers are concerned that a stigma against seeking help might be keeping people away. Although 10 or so couples have attended the sessions in the program's first year, during some recent weeks, no one has shown up.

Pickett said men are especially prone to stay away from such programs.

"They're afraid to take that risk," he said.

Another facilitator, Obo Addy, said many people just assume their marriages are fine if there are no obvious problems.

"A lot of people expect mediocre," he said. "They can't think that it can be more exciting."

Jaarsma, of Pine Rest, said he's not sure that a perceived stigma is keeping people away.

"I think it's because the word isn't out and not enough people are aware of it. If there is a stigma still associated with it, it's the same stigma that therapists have to deal with."

Jaarsma believes once people learn about Third Option, it will catch on.

"It's really non-threatening and really middle of the road. It does not put one person on the spot or get you defensive. It's just information and if you want to share, great."

The Christians hope other people discover Third Option.

"I think for me, a huge thing is just because you have an argument doesn't mean that you hate each other, it doesn't mean you're getting divorced," Laura said.

Erik said he's glad they attended all the sessions, and hopes they can find time to repeat the entire program.

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