



Can America's Religious Traditions Strengthen Marriage?

Minnesota Leaders Say "Yes"
and Propose How

MITCH PEARLSTEIN, PH.D.

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MITCH PEARLSTEIN, PH.D.
FOUNDER AND AMERICAN EXPERIMENT SENIOR FELLOW

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report draws on five intellectually rich roundtable discussions involving nineteen Minnesotans, both lay and clergy, held at Center of the American Experiment in the late summer and early fall of 2015.

A critical point before a quick half-dozen sample comments by participants: *Healthy marriages are the only kind advocated here. Domestically abusive unions need to be escaped, abused partners need protection, and abusive partners need cops called.*

(I) If clergy could speak to the whole country about marriage for one minute, what should they say?

- “If the question is religious leaders talking to the whole country about the religious aspects of marriage, the first thing you’d have to do is sell the whole country on the concept of religion in general. Because if you try to talk about the religious dimensions of marriage to people for whom religion is either off-putting or if they simply don’t grasp that religion is a legitimate topic for intellectual inquiry, it’s not

going to be a very fruitful conversation.”

(II) How can clergy retrieve their voice about marriage?

- “I’ve learned over the years that people are more willing to listen than I used to give them credit for. I talk about marriage. During the announcements people come up for special prayers, and they will come up for anniversary prayers. I just pray about it being a sacrament. About marriage being a symbol of living for each other instead of yourself. I’ve never had any negative feedback about that . . . I’m learning I can talk more about these things than I thought. I can ask more of people than I thought.”

(III) How can clergy do a better job reaching young people? And what about religious schools?

- “Religious schools are important because they have an unconstrained vocabulary. They can talk about everything. Public schools *can’t* talk about everything.”

(IV) How can religious leaders and institutions help working class young people? How can religious leaders and institutions help ex-offenders get their lives in order?

- “I know of no deeply dysfunctional individual who has had a long-term turnaround in his life outside of a deeply religious context.”

(V) How can religious leaders and institutions strengthen and save troubled marriages?

- “A dear friend contacted me earlier this summer to say she and her husband were divorcing. I think she thought I was going to be an

understanding ear, which I was. But I just said, ‘I don’t want you to get divorced. This hurts me. I love you both. . .’ She and her husband like the forcefulness of a friend saying, ‘Don’t do this. It will hurt you. It will hurt your kids. It will hurt me.’ I don’t know the outcome, but among various voices, we need a challenging one.”

(VI) What can religious leaders and institutions do about popular culture?

- “If we go into a school simply condemning everything young people are engaged in we get nowhere. And the good news is that not everything needs to be condemned.”

(VII) Conclusion

Calling on our religious leaders and traditions to help strengthen marriage and reduce nonmarital births is essential, and we can do so while fully respecting the First Amendment and American variety. Not taking advantage of our faith-based resources is akin to doing battle against pain and loss with a muscular arm tied needlessly behind our backs.

ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

- **The Rev. Paul D. Allick** is a parish priest of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota, serving at St. George's Church in St. Louis Park.
- **Peter Bell** is an American Experiment Senior Fellow and a former chair of the Center.
- **Rabbi Joshua Borenstein** is the executive director of Torah Academy, which his family helped found in 1945. He received his Rabbinical Ordination from Telshe Yeshiva in Chicago. He and his wife live in St. Louis Park and have nine children.
- **Dan Cain** is president of RS EDEN.
- **William J. Doherty** is professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota and director of the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project.
- **Bryan Dowd** is a professor in the Division of Health Policy and Management in the School of Public Health at the University of Minnesota.
- **Fr. Thomas Dufner** is a Roman Catholic priest.
- **Todd Flanders** is headmaster of Providence Academy and a faculty member of the Archdiocesan Catechetical Institute.
- **Katherine Kersten** is an American Experiment Senior Fellow and a former chair of the Center.
- **Pastor Ken Lewis**, now retired, served for 40 years as a senior pastor in South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, most recently at Trinity Baptist Church in St. Paul. "Happily married" to his wife Janell for 45 years, they have two children and seven grandchildren whom they "enjoy immensely."
- **Warren Limmer** is a Minnesota State Senator representing the northwest suburbs of Maple Grove, Osseo, Dayton, and Rogers. He is the Ranking Member of the Senate Judiciary Committee as well as Assistant Republican Caucus Leader.
- **Greg Marcus** is a long-time state employee working in legislative and K-12 fields.
- **Pam Myhra** is a Certified Public Accountant, former two-term Minnesota State Representative, wife to her husband Chuck for 34 years, and mother of three young adult children.
- **Rhonda Kruse Nordin**, an American Experiment Senior Fellow, is an author, educator, and public speaker whose research-based offerings provide point-of-view trends and recommendations to strengthen families.

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- **Robert Osburn** is executive director of Wilberforce Academy, where he works to train college students to apply their faith to challenging problems in society. His Ph.D. is from the University of Minnesota and his master's in theology is from Dallas Seminary, where he met his wife Susan, with whom he recently celebrated their 40th anniversary.
- **Bruce Peterson** has been a Hennepin County judge since 1999, handling many family law cases. He presided from 2006 to 2008 over Hennepin County Family Court, and from 2010 to 2013 over Hennepin County Co-Parent Court, providing supportive service to low-income, unmarried parents establishing paternity.
- **Todd Peterson** is president of Spring House Capital and author of the *Little Red Octopus* series.
- **Don Samuels** is an ordained minister, a Minneapolis School Board director, and COO of MicroGrants. He basks in the shadow of his wife – or is the “husband of” Sondra Samuels and father of two adult children and two high school aged daughters.
- **Sarah Walker** is founder of the Minnesota Second Chance Coalition.

Introduction

I've been writing about family fragmentation for a long time, and just about every time I do, readers (and nonreaders) ask what I believe might strengthen marriage and reduce nonmarital births. I usually start by recalling what the late Bill Raspberry, a brave and invaluable syndicated columnist, said in the Twin Cities a long time ago about reducing poverty.

It was such a big problem, Raspberry argued, that one could jump in anyplace and make a contribution. But if he had to pick just one spot, he would "start with the boys." Which is exactly what I usually say when the subject is the very much related demise of marriage in many parts of our country, including large swaths of Minnesota, since many boys become the men who women don't want to marry, and for very good reasons.

But it usually doesn't take me more than another sentence or two before adding something about how we must also take greater advantage of our religious traditions, institutions, and leaders if the United States is to escape its ranking as just about the world's worst offender in regards to family fragmentation, formerly known in the not-so-old days as "family breakdown."

How severe is family fragmentation? In rounded numbers, about 40 percent of all American babies come into this life outside of marriage, with rates roughly 30 percent for whites, 50 percent for Hispanics, and 70 percent for African Americans. As for divorce, more than 40 percent of all first marriages end that way.

What follows is my fourth effort in the last five years to think through how we might, in fact, take greater advantage of faith and faith-based

institutions, with each iteration more substantial and detailed than the one before.

The first two (short) discussions were in books of mine: *From Family Collapse to America's Decline: The Educational, Economic, and Social Costs of Family Fragmentation*, published in 2011; and *Broken Bonds: What Family Fragmentation Means for America's Future*, published in 2014.

The third was in an American Experiment symposium, *Silence of the Faithful: How Religious Leaders and Institutions Must Speak Up and Reach Out*, which was released in 2015 and included 34 brief essays by 36 men and women from across Minnesota and the country.

“Healthy marriages are the only kind advocated here. Domestically abusive unions need to be escaped, abused partners need protection, and abusive partners need cops called.”

And now this installment, which draws on five intellectually rich roundtable discussions involving nineteen Minnesotans, both lay and clergy, held at American Experiment in the late summer and early fall of 2015. It also directly draws on what I learned in the preceding projects. Roundtable conversations moved smoothly from theological to earthly. From abstract to programmatic. And from what were seen as good ideas and obligations of ordained men and women to those of congregants.



If I were to tease ten of the most frequently cited as well as most important and intriguing ideas and themes in those conversations, the list might include:

- Fear of offending or stigmatizing parishioners, many of whom have been divorced or who have had children outside of marriage, are major reasons why clergy don't speak out about the importance of marriage.
- Clergy should talk about marriage, divorce, and nonmarital births in a spirit of love, but those who remain silent because they are "cowed by the culture" should just "get over it."
- Congregants are more open to hearing strong messages about marriage than many clergy assume.
- People crave unconditional love just as marriage demands self-sacrificial love and real forgiveness.
- When couples face the possibility of divorce, clergy and friends should provide not just understanding ears, but challenging ones. Clergy and friends should fight to keep (non-abusive) marriages intact.
- Premarital counseling by clergy is critical, as is the availability of counseling for new husbands and wives.
- Religious schools are essential, in part because their teachers – as opposed to public school teachers – can "talk about anything."
- Offenders and ex-offenders need religion, not warmed-over social activism.
- As long as it doesn't pose a danger to anyone involved, clergy should help persuade single

mothers to allow the fathers of their children to reengage with them (or perhaps *engage* with their children for the first time).

- Religious leaders can make a difference when it comes to strengthening marriage, but challenges are tremendous.

If I were to tease out an additional ten more specific and (often) modest things religious institutions might do to strengthen marriage and reduce nonmarital births, that list might look like this:

“The first thing you’d have to do is sell the whole country on the concept of religion in general.”

- Churches, synagogues, and other places of worship could recognize wedding anniversaries by inviting couples celebrating them to come forward for special prayers, perhaps during Announcements.
- Churches could have “Anniversary Committees” charged with organizing coffee and cake get-togethers after services, or perhaps on another consistent day of the week, in honor of members celebrating wedding anniversaries that week or month. With everyone (perhaps in town) invited.
- Brides and grooms could be put on pedestals – both literally and figuratively – as many Jews do when newly married couples are hoisted on

chairs for “chair dances” among relatives and friends.

- Churches, synagogues, and other religious institutions could encourage candid talk about marriage and marriage-related issues in more intimate settings such as Bible studies.
- Religious institutions could present robust challenges surrounding chastity and fidelity. And if adults were truly to believe in such principles, young people (goes the belief) might be attracted to them.
- Churches and other religious institutions could help find ways for more young people to attend religiously animated schools “in which there is a depth to everything.”
- Churches and other religious institutions could help ex-offenders get their lives in order so they might become better and more likely marriage partners. Related is confidence that “jailhouse conversions” can be real.
- Churches could create groups composed of young married couples who “provide each other with fellowship and support,” and who become “shining lights” and “evangelists” on behalf of marriage.
- Churches and other religious institutions might start a “Marital First Responders” program, a grassroots effort championed by Professor Bill Doherty in which congregants are trained “to be more confident, effective, supportive, and sometimes challenging” in helping friends with marriage and other relationship problems.
- And while such efforts wouldn’t pertain to marriage as such, churches could develop

“public commitment to parenting ceremonies” in which “unmarried parents commit to work with each other for the benefit of their children.”

My great hope is that both clergy and congregants across Minnesota and the nation will find these and other ideas weaving through this report worth pondering. Perhaps one way of taking advantage of them, as there is quite a bit of grist here, is to discuss what’s under the six topic headings in serial or partial order. Or, better yet, in any way you choose.

This is a Minnesota-focused essay in the sense that all discussants are Minnesotans and that the situations described often took place here. It’s a national essay in that most everything proposed or lamented is no less pertinent in 49 other states.

In regards to exactly who the panelists are and how they were selected, there was no (social) science in how I went about choosing the nineteen men and women. Or more exactly, there is nothing representative about participants in a survey way. Rather, and as I have done in the past, especially in recruiting forty interviewees for *Broken Bonds* from Minnesota and across the country, my main criteria in seeking participants for this new project was that they be notably smart, interesting, and *roughly* representative of various communities and points of view. Of the nineteen men and women, at least six are ordained.

Might the group lean right both theologically and politically? Yes, but not dramatically. Suffice it to say I invited more religious and political progressives than the number who agreed to join in. Same regarding women, of whom there are four. As you read, you may consider if conversations would have been different in



consequential ways if the proportion of women had been higher. My own sense is no.

A critical point before going on: Healthy marriages are the only kind advocated here. Domestically abusive unions need to be escaped, abused partners need protection, and abusive partners need cops called.

Denominations and persuasions represented around the roundtables ran from “A” (atheist) to “B” (Baptist) to “C” (Catholic) on to “J” (Jewish) to at least “U” (Unitarian Universalist), with other worldviews along the ecumenical way.

It might not be strictly accurate to say that save for a quotable Orthodox rabbi, everyone else is Catholic, Protestant, or Unitarian, as there were a couple of atheists in the group, which is not to say they don’t attend religious services. As for ages, participants ranged (I’m guessing) from the 30s to the 70s. Four are people of color. Everyone lives in the Twin Cities area.

Discussions ran upwards of 75 minutes on average. I moderated with questions more or less following the order of the subheads below. Each of the five sessions was recorded and transcribed. At which point my job was to make sense of 245 pages of double-spaced transcripts, mulling over and pulling out important insights, often beautifully expressed.

The great bulk of the text below is in the respective voices of the nineteen, edited for clarity as oral speech rarely translates well to the written word. On several occasions I cut and pasted, combining complementary points made by an individual during different portions of his or her session. To assure accuracy, everyone had an opportunity to review how I quoted and paraphrased them and to make appropriate changes if they saw fit.

Albeit on a smaller scale, this is the fifth time I’ve used this general method. The first was with my dissertation 35 years ago when I ferreted through more than 800 pages of transcripts, and the most recent before this exercise was two years ago with *Broken Bonds*, when I took up residence in about 1,400 pages of transcripts.

My great thanks to the nineteen participants this time around for their often brilliant ideas, remembrances, and no-longer private thoughts and introspections.

Thanks, too, to my longtime colleague Peter Zeller for taking care of logistics, starting with making sure that both recorders recorded.

Scott Buchschacher once again for his beautiful design work.

Jennifer Turchi and her colleagues for their excellent transcribing.

Elliott Polsky, a former American Experiment intern from the University of St. Thomas, as I once again drew on a copious literature review regarding marriage and religion he wrote at my request in 2014.

And my large and continuing thanks to the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, LML & FTL Lanners Foundation, Chiaroscuro Foundation, Mahlon and Karen Schneider, Richard Goldman and other Center funders who have made this publication, along with the others noted above, possible in the first place.

MP
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(I) If clergy could speak to the whole country about marriage for one minute, what should they say?

All five roundtable conversations went their distinctive ways, but I always started out by asking what participants thought clergy should say if they had a minute – a robust sixty seconds – to talk to all Americans about marriage. As is the case throughout, answers to this first question ranged from the conceptual to the specific. They also branched out a lot, profitably. We start off here with Professor Dowd.

Bryan Dowd: “If the question is religious leaders talking to the whole country about the religious aspects of marriage, the first thing you’d have to do is sell the whole country on the concept of religion in general. Because if you try to talk about the religious dimensions of marriage to people for whom religion is either off-putting or if they simply don’t grasp that religion is a legitimate topic for intellectual inquiry, it’s not going to be a very fruitful conversation. So I guess there are really two ways that anyone, including religious leaders, could talk about marriage to the whole country. One is from a secular, practical perspective, in keeping with a billboard I once saw that said ‘Married people are richer.’ But if we are talking to people who are able to process messages about religion, then they have to be tailored to their respective religious traditions.”

Bruce Peterson: “What I would say a religious or spiritual person might have to offer as opposed to a parent or an educator is that marriage is a very spiritual undertaking. We have a culture that emphasizes flash, fun, and instant gratification. But marriage is a profound exploration of who you are and how someone else mirrors that to you and pushes on your painful buttons. And who

shows you who *they* are and what happens when you push on *their* painful buttons. The spiritual unfolding during a marriage makes it what it is. The enterprise needs to be thought of as a spiritual one rather than a self-gratification one.”

Following up on comments by others regarding “virtue” and “self-sacrificial love,” Todd Flanders said:

Todd Flanders: “The problem in our society is that ‘self-sacrificial love’ sounds a lot like I have to sacrifice something, namely myself, which I’m unlikely to want to do. I’m toying with the idea there may be another angle which can appeal to our sense of priority of self. And that is, I think, a crisis of unconditional love. I think most adults would acknowledge to themselves, if not immediately to others, that they feel a dearth of unconditional love in their lives. Working with children as I do, it’s clear they desperately desire and need unconditional love. And marriage most fully represents to the child the existence of unconditional love.”

Paul Allick: “My nine nieces and nephews, all of them, waited to have children before they were married, except one. But almost all are still getting divorced. My concern is they got married in order to have children. But did they think about their relationships? Or were they thinking about having children as fulfillments for themselves? So one thing religious leaders could ask: Could you please think before you get married? It’s kind of opposite of what we’re talking about here, encouraging marriage. But people need to think about what they’re doing with their lives before they make big decisions like that.”

Pam Myhra: “We need to start good parenting when children are young. If we wait to reduce nonmarital births when we have teenage girls or



young women, it's just too late. There are some things we can do, but it really needs to start with good parenting and good marriage counseling from the get-go."

Dan Cain: "If I can get all the clergy together and have one minute with the American people to deal with family issues, I probably wouldn't start with families at all. I would want to lay the groundwork for something that would unify people, as sometimes I think religion divides and Christ unites."

Sarah Walker: "I have a hard time even imagining a scenario in which religious leaders come together and speak in one voice."

After I told her the question referred to individual clergy, she continued:

"Faith leaders should step outside the dichotomization of politics around family issues and serve as a bridge to solutions. The whole debate about whether people of the same sex should marry, for example, increasingly amounts to separate faith groups aligning and dividing themselves politically just as much as society does. There's nothing more important for a faith leader than to mitigate suffering, not focus on policies and politics. Politicians have exploited religious leaders and institutions for personal gain."

"I would have clergy say that partnering is important for success in life and that no partnership exceeds marriage."

Todd Peterson: "I would keep it under 30 seconds to help avoid finger wagging. I would have clergy say that partnering is important for success in life and that no partnership exceeds marriage. Marriage is hard, but we're here to help you."

After agreeing with what someone said about "roots," Pastor Lewis added:

Ken Lewis: "D. Elton Trueblood was a 20th Century Christian thinker and philosopher who said we are living in a 'cut-flower generation.' A flower may be beautiful now, but what happens when you cut it from its roots, or its roots turn out to be bad? Our culture is withdrawing its roots from the Word of God and the Judeo-Christian traditions, teachings, and truths which fed the roots of this country for so many years. And to the extent we continue doing that, we are going to wilt and have problems. It's a root problem."

Greg Marcus: "If my theoretical religious leader had a minute I think he should get up and say, (to those inclined toward belief in a transcendent and perfect creator), that 'Marriage is a divine institution, but we're never going to achieve perfection marriages or any other relationships. That being said, there is a perfect to which we aspire and, by whom we are helped, and with whom we are not alone.' Those who believe that earthly joys and troubles are temporary while the future is eternal ought to exhibit more faith and patience, both to enter marriage and remain in it."

Rhonda Nordin: "Our sons are now 25 and 27; neither is married. So when I think of marriage, I think in the context of 'What do I want to tell my sons about marriage? What about it do I want religious leaders to help them understand?' To hitchhike on Paul Allick's comment, it would be helpful for leaders to help young people think through what they want out of a love relationship."

I wish our culture would follow what is now considered the ‘old fashioned’ approach to family formation: One meets, falls in love, marries, and *then* has a baby. I see many young families that follow this sequence and they are very happy, very blessed. They do not regret having followed this course. Our young people need to hear this.

“Churches can also help young people evaluate potential mates. Encourage them to take the time to know one another and develop a relationship that pleases God (which probably excludes living together) and talk about marriage – what it means to you. Why do you want to marry? Why do you want to marry *this* person? It’s important that each person can answer these questions before walking down the aisle.”

Katherine Kersten: “The first thing I thought of when you asked that question is the marriages of my own children. I have three children who are married now, out of my four children. All of them believe that Jesus Christ is at the center of their marriages and that this will sustain them throughout any challenges. Most people today wouldn’t know what to make of that comment, as we’re in a post-Christian culture. Religious leaders can make a distinctive contribution, but the challenge is tremendous.”

For my part, on one occasion I said my answer to the question about what people of the cloth should say about marriage in a minute would be something like: “It would be good if clergy emphasized they knew ‘stuff happens’ and that life is complicated, but that we’re not being fair to our kids, we’re not being fair to ourselves, and we’re not being fair to our country. We love you. C’mon, let’s try harder.” Settles that.

(II) How can clergy retrieve their voice about marriage?

Bruce Peterson: “I think what’s stopping them is great concern about offending or leaving behind the many, many people in congregations who are

“We have seminars and talks and workshops on every conceivable topic, but I can’t think of one on marriage.”

not married. At a certain point half your flock has been divorced. I’m a member of a Unity church, and we are a very healthy, personal growth group. We have seminars and talks and workshops on every conceivable topic, but I can’t think of one on marriage. It’s not happening for whatever reason. There’s a lot of room for improvement.”

Paul Allick: “I’ve learned over the years that people are more willing to listen than I used to give them credit for. I talk about marriage. During the announcements people come up for special prayers, and they will come up for anniversary prayers. I just pray about it being a sacrament. About marriage being a symbol of living for each

“I’m learning I can talk more about these things than I thought.”

other instead of yourself. I've never had any negative feedback about that, and I've had some good conversations with divorced people. I've never met anyone who is divorced who's bragging about it. So I'm learning I can talk more about these things than I thought. I can ask more of people than I thought."

After I noted that he had previously written about how the real communication he has with people on these subjects is not from the pulpit but in private and group sessions, Fr. Allick continued:

"It's a lot easier to address it at a Bible study with twelve people. You take the gospel of the day and it is Jesus saying you can't get divorced. Moses allowed you to get divorced because you're hard-hearted, but you shouldn't do it. And with so many

"There has to be a sense of grace and graciousness in the way clergy talk about marriage."

people around the table who have been divorced, you just inevitably have conversations about what it means for us. They may be happy not to be with that person anymore, but I've never met anyone who is happy that it happened, especially when they have children."

Don Samuels: "There are so many divorced people in congregations, so many kids from divorced families and from families in which there never has been marriage, that there is a reluctance to stigmatize. There has to be a sense of grace and

graciousness in the way clergy talk about marriage, with people believing they're coming from a place of love and a concern for their best interests. If people believe that, they can take a lot of stuff. The devastation of marriage is especially widespread in the African American community. So many single parents, so many children of single-parent families that it's very hard to preach about it in a way that is not alienating."

"You can say clergy are currently cowed by the culture. I don't know how to fix that other than to get over it."

In the 2015 symposium I mentioned at the top, Don Samuels, who is ordained, wrote that over a 25-year span he was a member of four African American churches but had never once heard a preacher say anything from the pulpit about marriage.

After likewise noting that clergy are hesitant to talk about marriage out of fear of offending divorced congregants as well as unmarried parents or cohabiting people in the pews, Bryan Dowd said:

Bryan Dowd: "So you can say clergy are currently cowed by the culture. I don't know how to fix that other than to get over it."

Todd Flanders: "Forty or fifty years into the sexual revolution, I suppose there are many religious leaders who have had broken lives and have compromised what used to be called sexual morality. And they may feel they lack the moral authority and are open to charges of criticism

if they talk about marriage. The only real cure for that is ownership of one's brokenness and a willingness to lead out of an acknowledgment of our common brokenness as human beings. That's a much more compelling message than hiding, but it will take a lot of courage."

Ken Lewis: "I've been in the pulpit for 38 years preaching every Sunday, and a lot of time people say 'thank you' for speaking the truth, 'I know that wasn't easy.' Other times I've gotten resistance, but most of the time I haven't. It takes some guts to speak the truth. 'The truth will set you free,' and we know who said that. But as someone other than Christ also said, 'first it will make you miserable.'

"There have been times when I've spoken about these topics a lot. I've done it with youth groups, and I've done it from the pulpit because it's simply there in the text. I've gotten some kick-back from some, who have said things such as, 'I didn't feel comfortable with that. My daughter was here' kind of thing. But as I said to parents, those times were great opportunities to go home and talk to their children because I was respectful, I wasn't vulgar or rude, but I did speak the truth. And heaven forbid that some eight-year-old should ask his or her parents, 'What's he talking about?'

"Just speak the truth. Encourage your clergy to do that. Some want to stay on light and easy topics. The happy topics. Others will really grapple with the text and grapple with the nitty gritty, and they ought to be commended. The first ones might pack the pews a little more, but the latter, when they are really adept at it, really address the issues."

Bill Doherty: "The spectrum of church leaders is such, I would have to know where they're coming from theologically. Maybe that sounds like a copout, but I've worked with folks from

Evangelical conservatives to liberal Unitarian-Universalists, so I'm not going to give you what I think clergy, generally speaking should say. For example, the idea of sex before marriage for liberals is not an issue anymore. For conservatives it is. It complicates things for them. My big thing is that clergy have to be faithful enough to their traditions so they have credibility with their flocks."

This kicked off an exchange with Peter Bell.

Peter Bell: "I think clergy should make the moral case rather than the religious case because I think it is stronger, more compelling and more accessible. When I say the 'moral case' I mean that children are best raised in committed, supportive, stable, and loving relationships. That's as close to a settled question as social science has."

Bill Doherty: "When people have made a promise for life, it has its own moral weight, regardless of whether there are children. Even if the children are fully grown up and autonomous. The messaging of clergy should not be only about children because if they do that, as opposed to focusing on the weight of the marital commitment itself, we actually undermine marriage."

Peter Bell: "It was very clear to me that when I

"Each religious tradition needs to identify the sources of its own ineffectiveness around issues of marriage and two-parent families."



got married I was making a solemn commitment. But I would be dishonest if I didn't say that commitment deepened when my first child was born, as I said to myself, 'You're really in this now. There's no backdoor. The key's thrown away.' So I'm saying there was a two-tiered dynamic going on, with children providing a second and deeper tier. Would you agree with that?"

Bill Doherty: "I completely agree with that. My point, though, is that when the discussion is only about children, the first tier evaporates."

Peter Bell: "I think that's true."

Bill Doherty: "I spent two and a half years meeting every three weeks with eight Evangelical pastors who were working on this and I was the process leader. One of the ways we formulated the problem early on was how to effectively combine theological views – which I'll translate now as values about marital commitment, children growing up in two-parent families, honor and respect within marriage, and avoiding nonmarital childbearing – with a sense of care and compassion for the complexity of life and the suffering we all have.

"Each religious tradition needs to identify the sources of its own ineffectiveness around issues of marriage and two-parent families. The Evangelicals I came to know and respect as a Unitarian-Universalist are un-ambivalent in their beliefs and theological values about marriage and kids growing up in two-parent families – on *Sunday*. But they have trouble holding that out to people pastorally on *Monday*. You don't want to drive people away at a time when they need to come closer. It's a huge challenge.

"Conservative clergy lose people who choose to go elsewhere for pastoral counseling. Pastors may feel

consistent, but they're often not very effective. And even conservative clergy deal with a culture where an ultimate sin is to be judgmental. So it's very complex for them. We developed a counseling approach in which they could hold to their values but also deal with people compassionately.

"As for mainstream liberal churches it's really finding *any* voice about marriage at all, as 'family diversity' has become an ultimate value. Conservatives are stronger on Sunday mornings in their sermons and they're softer and mushier on Mondays. I think liberals are the exact opposite."

Don Samuels: "Inter-marriages and the liberalization of relationships over the last few decades have led to an opening up of society. But they also have lessened opportunities to appeal to people based on the strength of their historic communities, relationships and alliances. If there was only one silo of people, their bonds would reinforce marriage.

"But we now have a pluralistic society where every now and then one of my people marries one of your people and so on, causing the loss of traditions that are inherent in one spouse or perhaps both. So we begin to float out there on our own.

"We have to find a new theme or rationale for

"I can only speak for Judaism, but when it comes to marriage, having children and raising a family is one of a Jew's main purposes in this world, if not the main purpose."

people getting married and taking marriage as seriously as they did in the past. I think the greatest opportunity is focusing on the welfare of children, especially given that brain science is demonstrating the amount of stimulation, reliability, indulgence and warmth children need in their earliest years, and how all this is enhanced by two adults, not one, in permanent, not transient relationships. We cannot raise a balanced, secure, productive, and happy generation unless we create the domestic security that is locked up in marriage.”

Joshua Borenstein: “Building on what Don just said, we’ve had certain assumptions over the years that people are knowledgeable about certain values and appreciate them. We have to start with those who have already bought into those values, reassuring and strengthening such people, as well as explicitly delivering a message. I can only speak for Judaism, but when it comes to marriage, having children and raising a family is one of a Jew’s main purposes in this world, if not *the* main purpose. We have to start by reminding and teaching people that marriage isn’t just a personal choice or lifestyle, but a spiritual and holy purpose and obligation. That’s what God wants you to do. If we can strengthen those already in the fold, that allows us to go out and bring others in.”

Somewhat after Don Samuels’ comment above, Fr. Dufner said:

Thomas Dufner: “I was just reading in Ezra and Nehemiah how they had to set aside foreign wives. They recognized the problem of inter-marriage in the watering down of religion and put it very well. The biggest problem with such couples is they drop out altogether. That’s the common experience, they drop out. Obviously we want to nurture them. We want to pull them together. Typically,

if one partner is not all that religious, we still want to form them both. I’ve had a lot of occasions where there’s a Catholic woman and kind of a non-practicing Christian husband. We like to see them both in church. I’ll bring them along. We want to unite them together, stronger and stronger. But typically, and back to the rabbi’s point, we dissipate ourselves and we lose ourselves by inter-marriage.

“Ultimately, we want people’s happiness. We actually believe there is a norm and that God has a plan. It’s a good plan, going back to Genesis and marriage, and how God made the male and female. But we have huge challenges before us, as one of the things all of us, Jews and Christians alike, used to maintain was that the only place for sex is marriage. That was something we all held in common. That’s changed now. We’ve suffered a breach with what we, as Catholics, call ‘natural law,’ which is to say that nature speaks or God speaks to us through natural revelation, and that even our bodies show us pattern, design, and purpose. That’s not commonly accepted anymore.

“The very notion that the only place for sex is in marriage has been undermined, obviously by desire, but also by contraception. The entire sexual revolution is made possible by contraception which, over the last fifty years, has led to the most fundamental cultural change the world has ever

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gay marriage or anything else.”



seen. We've also made no-fault divorce an easy way out of marriage. Rabbi, to your point, yes, we do have to start with people who already have buy-in. But we also have to reach out to those who see their own brokenness, let them know that God loves them and wants them to have better lives. And it's going to start with truth and love together. End of homily."

Joshua Borenstein: "A significant portion of clergy from the more liberal streams, of whatever religion you're talking about, is not bought into marriage. You can only retrieve your voice if you have it. We need to work on promoting marriage outside of the flare issues like gay marriage. A consecrated marriage doesn't have to be controversial. We don't have to compare it to gay marriage or anything else."

Warren Limmer: "Especially in Minnesota, we just can't confront anyone, even in a loving manner, with something that might be better. Can we ever retrieve the influence of faith with fewer and fewer people participating? It's not just the responsibility of clergy to retrieve it. The lay congregation also has a responsibility and influence. We cannot rely only on those in a collar."

Dan Cain: "I think what you want to do from the pulpit is get a message out there that causes people to talk about it when they leave church. Not necessarily give all the answers, but get enough questions out there so people continue having the conversation. Other times, when people have personal issues they want to talk about, clergy can sit down with them one-on-one. It's not either/or. It's both, depending on circumstances."

Katherine Kersten: "Young couples and the pastor at my church, Holy Family in St. Louis Park, are building a group of young married people who provide each other with fellowship and support as well as invite others in. They are a shining light.

They have kids and are an example of the beauty and happiness of married life. They are evangelists. They are inviting, joyful and loving, not wagging their fingers at all. To the extent groups like this can be created in churches, that's potentially a very fruitful approach."

(III) How can clergy do a better job reaching young people? And what about religious schools?

Referring to the severely distressed but composite "Fishtown" Charles Murray describes in his seminal Coming Apart, Todd Flanders spoke of the collapse of his hometown, which he said has come to be a real Fishtown.

Todd Flanders: "There is just devastation. There is family devastation. Not so long ago, 50 years ago, all of these people would have been churched. Small town, Midwest. They all would have been churched. But nobody goes to church. Everybody goes to public schools. The parochial schools are dying. Excuse me for focusing on education, but if we're talking about the lower half, I don't know how we can go into Fishtown and fix it without very, very strong measures.

"If we can get kids into the kinds of schools where we, oh, teach a Jane Austin novel, that would educate boys because boys want to be attractive to women and women historically have had a major role in shaping men and still do. I asked new faculty members the other day – as we were reading the *Abolition of Man* by C.S. Lewis, as we do every year before school starts – what the essential difference was between *Pride and Prejudice* and pornography? They were kind of surprised by the question. We pursued it and I was provocative. Both are intrinsically about guys and gals getting together, right? Jane Austin takes a long time getting to that conclusion, pornography

gets to it quicker. But is there any essential distinction between the two? It would be really good for young people, and everybody else, to have some idea what the distinction is. Yet outside of our religious traditions, I don't know if we have a cultural answer to that.

"We begin with an understanding of what unconditional love is; that every human being is a gift; an unrepeatable creation of God. And there is a dimension to our giftedness, our creation as male and female, which has relational implications throughout life. Most of the kids in schools like ours are fortunate to experience intact families, but many do not. Many of their parents intentionally want their kids exposed to such families and traditions.

"We have a high proportion of kids who get married quickly after college and start having kids of their own. And they'll frequently marry other Providence alumni. I asked one young woman

"Religious schools are important because they have an unconstrained vocabulary. They can talk about everything. Public schools *can't* talk about everything."

a couple of years ago who, after a few years, got engaged to one of our other graduates, 'Why are you marrying each other?' She said that 'As soon as we get out of Providence Academy, we women are eager to discover the wide world of men. But after discovering that wild world, we realize it's

not too hot, and we figure that maybe some of the Providence guys who learned some of the things we did are more attractive than they were back in high school."

Katherine Kersten: "One of my children went to several public schools, and I remember visiting them. My daughter would be in second or third grade, and I would see banners on the walls saying 'Respect Each Other' and 'Be Nice.' These messages were pounded in, but teachers could never tell the kids the reason for these kinds of things. A Christian school can do that."

Bryan Dowd: "Religious schools are important because they have an unconstrained vocabulary. They can talk about everything. Public schools *can't* talk about everything."

Todd Flanders: "I love the phrase 'unconstrained vocabulary.' That's exactly right. Our teachers speak of it. They say they are freer at Providence than they've ever been."

These last comments by Todd Flanders and Bryan Dowd about often greater intellectual latitude in private as opposed to public education substantiated Prof. Mary Ellen Ashcroft's argument in an essay she wrote for American Experiment Quarterly in 2000: "Risky Business? Teaching Literature at a Christian Liberal Arts College." After teaching at Bethel College in Minnesota for a decade she found the institution to "offer tremendous freedom to pursue the liberal arts in a context that is respectful of students, where colleagues value each other, and where learning can happen on a number of levels." This was in contrast, she wrote, to her time teaching at a major research institution where "Some faculty members talked about Christianity as if its only manifestation was snake handling."



Bruce Peterson: “We’re not Catholic, but my daughter went through the entire Catholic system in Minneapolis and we loved it: DeLaSalle High School, Christ the King, and St. Thomas. I was just driving by DeLaSalle the other day and had such fond memories. They would have a theme every year, things like ‘We’re not in this alone.’ There was a depth to everything. There also were years when she identified herself as atheist or Buddhist, but the values were there, and I was very pleased with the whole enterprise.

“Kathryn Edin makes it clear in her research that one of the reasons for high rates of unmarried births among low-income women is the lack of meaningful alternatives. Middle-class and professional-class kids have career prospects, travel, purpose and other exciting things going on in their lives, but low-income kids usually don’t. My daughter got a wonderful amount out of her high school church group at a time when a lot of values teenage girls pick up from the culture are, frankly, crap. There was a sense of deeper meaning in the group; the idea that people could really care for each other. It was a very inclusive group. None of the cattiness of teenage groups. So when I read Edin’s description of the problem, I think part of the prescription is youth groups, church youth groups, with appealing and meaningful opportunities for kids to find out there are important things in life that you can pursue other than sex and child-bearing at an early age.”

I agree with Judge Peterson that sociologist Kathryn Edin’s two celebrated books, Promises I Can Keep (with Maria Kafalis) and Doing the Best I Can (with Timothy J. Nelson) describe the respective lives and limited prospects of low-income women and men with unusual insight. But subtracting from the two excellent and high-profile works is the minuscule amount of time and attention she

devotes to the religious lives – or lack of religious lives – in the people she clearly cares about.

Paul Allick: “I’ve never understood why, when you get past twelfth grade you can go to school anywhere you want and the government will give you a loan or grant to do it, but not before then. So I’m totally in favor of helping kids go to religious schools. When I get teenagers in confirmation, what I quickly realize is that the most important thing they’re taught in public schools, and what they hold onto as the most important value in life, is ‘tolerance.’ Which is not a bad thing, except that it becomes relativism. So all they can talk about is being tolerant. I have to help them understand that there’s truth, that there is something unique about being Christian and that they can be proud of it, that they can articulate it. It’s not an insult to other people to feel connected to who you are. I’ve had parents get upset with me, charging that I’m saying mean things about other people. I would add that not every religious school is actually teaching their tradition.”

Greg Marcus: “A three-word answer: ‘religious released time.’ Minnesota’s K-12 statutes, and those of many other states, provide for religious released time in the middle of the K-12 day. That used to be more popular than it is today, but that statute still exists.”

“I point out to the brides that, ‘On your wedding day, if you’re living together, you’re not going to sparkle.’”

Rhonda Nordin: “Churches can help parents paint the *possibility* for their children having their own successful love stories. The earlier this vision is established the better. Whether the imprint from the marriage of a person’s parents is good or bad, church leaders who speak about love and emphasize forgiveness help young people overcome negative impressions from their parents’ relationship and help them learn from it.

The prevalence of divorce scares many away from marriage. Young people need to hear: “That may have happened to your mom and dad, but it doesn’t have to happen to you. Here’s what you can do.” Then embark on teaching about love that emphasizes forgiveness.”

Todd Flanders: “We teach our upper school kids there is no such a thing as ‘safe sex.’ Don’t listen to people who tell you there is. And it’s a good thing. Sex has an element of danger to it, and that’s one of its powers and beauties. That’s why it demands care, responsibility and development.”

Thomas Dufner: “Any time you choose to give yourself totally to one person, you have thereby chosen to forsake all others, and there will be self-denial. There has to be. For every positive choice, we’re negating all other choices, and that’s one of the things nobody wants to accept today.

“What I’m also noticing in many, many young people is that I don’t see young men head over heels in love. I don’t see strong passion at the time of marriage. I don’t see guys just silly with love. A majority of the couples have already established intimate relationships, and I actually invite them to separate, though I don’t require it. I point out to the brides that, ‘On your wedding day, if you’re living together, you’re not going to sparkle. Nothing special is going to happen that night.

Nothing new is going to happen, and everybody in the church feels it.’

“When there’s tension, when there’s excitement, when something new is going on, everybody in the church feels it. I believe that’s why we have to have bigger limos, bigger celebrations, and farther honeymoon destinations to make up for the fact that nothing new is going to happen.”

Don Samuels: “Young people are hankering for a challenging set of principles, something their generation can put a stake in the ground and say, ‘We believed in something. We did something about it. And we inconvenienced ourselves for it.’ We’ve totally underrated the importance of the passion in the human animal to sacrifice for a cause. And I think marriage is a sacrifice.”

Let the record show Don was smiling broadly at this point.

Don Samuels: “If we give that challenge around chastity and around fidelity, and we really believe it, young people will be attracted to it. If we present a robust challenge to young people for the good life, I believe they will be attracted. I think we underestimate the Mormon invention of those two years of service. They’ve got these young guys in the prime of their sexuality, at the starting blocks of their careers and adulthood, and they’re riding around in North Minneapolis: two pasty white boys with black pants and white shirts, when everyone else is [vivid urban gerund] in the pool. These guys come out of that experience with a deep sense of having accomplished something, sacrificed something for their community, for their people, for their faith, for their God. It carries them at a level of intensity in their lives we can’t even put a value on.”



Thomas Dufner: “Kids love a challenge. We are failing to inspire not just religiously but across the board. We don’t inspire them with greatness. We’ve taken the passion out of the souls of young people on a wide range. For instance, I don’t see kids curious about driving across country anymore, or curious about going to Alaska. All that is being replaced by any device that has internet access. That’s an interior world where an entire evening can be spent. You’ve been entertained but not satisfied, never built up. I think we’re sucking the passion out of life.”

Joshua Borenstein: “In our culture we separate boys and girls educationally. That basic premise continues until they begin dating, but dating is not a recreation. In my world, dating is for the purpose of finding a mate to be married. One of the reasons, I think, for the lack of passion is that young people are not looking for someone to marry; they’re looking for someone to have a good time with, and sometimes it leads to marriage and sometimes it doesn’t. Our entire educational system is different because we’re trying to speak to boys and girls based on what their tendencies are. The girl’s education is more social, a lot more communal work. As for the boys, we just beat them down with education where they’re so busy studying they can’t get into trouble.”

Referring to a church with a singles program when he was younger, Senator Limmer said:

Warren Limmer: “There was an Evangelical church in New Hope with a singles ministry which made it possible, by just walking in, for young people to share a foundation of faith with others, including those with similar upbringings or those who were new to the faith. Events also were rich in biblical lessons, with things developing to the point where about 200 singles

would participate. This was about 27 years ago, and I met my wife there, for which I am very grateful. But the program was decimated over a three-year period because so many of the people married each other, with the great majority of those marriages still strong and vibrant. Very few people have gotten divorced, or at least among those we’re connected to. More churches – of all faiths – need to do things like this now. And they don’t have to do it as single houses of worship, as they could regionalize.”

Thomas Dufner: “I support church ministries for singles. But I’m actually finding that about a third of the couples with whom I meet met online, and it’s growing.”

**“With working class people
as well as ex-offenders, if they do
come to church, offer them religion.
Don’t offer them warmed-over
social activism.”**

I asked if he thought this was a good or bad idea.

Thomas Dufner: “There are a couple of Catholic online services such as ‘CatholicMatch’ and ‘Ave Maria Singles.’ They have led to some of the best relationships I’ve seen, so I don’t dare oppose them. I’m finding them to be pretty good.”

(IV) How can religious leaders and institutions help working class young people? How can religious leaders and institutions help ex-offenders get their lives in order?

Paul Allick: “I can only speak from the perspective of Mainline Churches, which have been hopelessly absent from any of this work. I believe there is a shift happening in what we call the Missional Church, calling for us to think more about the neighborhoods we’re in and what matters to people who live in them. There’s a shift going from sitting in buildings waiting for people to show up, to going where they are. We’ve been doing this at St. George’s in a program we call ‘Perspectives.’ Going out once a week this summer just to be with kids, playing basketball with them, many of whom don’t have dads around. And we feed them and sit with them.

“I know that with working class people as well as ex-offenders, if they do come to church, offer them religion. Don’t offer them warmed-over social activism. My sense is when people are hurting, they need religion, that’s why we do it. But we shouldn’t necessarily think we know what to do for

“Judges often start out with a great degree of skepticism about jailhouse conversions, but I’ve come to believe there are lots of them.”

them. What we can offer is religion, the message of the Gospel, and not be afraid to come off as ignorant, if that’s the right word. What would I do if I was going to start an ex-offender program? I probably would go to a church in the African American community that’s doing it, because many

churches there are, and ask: ‘How do you do this?’”

Rhonda Nordin: “One local church offers an outreach program where volunteers care for mothers’ children one morning each week. No questions asked. There’s no fee. It’s called ‘Moms’ Morning.’ The program helps alleviate the burden of childcare in a modest way. Once a month, mothers can also stay for a free lunch where they get to know one another and draw additional support for each other and their families. This is just one example of how churches can support parents, and they needn’t be members to participate.”

Bruce Peterson: “That sounds like a great service for stressed mothers. The churches offering AA and NA groups get visited by the people I see in court. One of my jobs right now is managing Drug Court in Hennepin County. We have quite a few guys who have been really down and out, who have done prison time, for whom there is a church home, sometimes literally. We have one participant living in a minister’s house because he can’t get housing anyplace else. So there are churches who are stepping up right now. As for becoming productive family members, the combination of felony records, no meaningful employment histories, no role models regarding successful relationships, and lots of trauma (PTSD-type traumas), creates a high barrier to being an attractive marriage partner. These men need lots of help and support on their way to recovery, and I have seen churches provide that. Even offering meaningful volunteer opportunities has been helpful.”

Greg Marcus: “It seems to me that the easiest way to form relationships with ex-cons is to have started a relationship with them while they were in prison. I’m thinking of Prison Fellowship Ministry and other faith-based programs.”



Bruce Peterson: “Judges often start out with a great degree of skepticism about jailhouse conversions, but I’ve come to believe there are lots of them, so I agree with you.”

Dan Cain: “I started a group three years ago for people who took somebody else’s life. They live in the community and they all served a minimum of 15 years at one shot in prison, the longest being 36 years. They need fellowship, they need friends, they need support, and conventional wisdom is that they can’t ever talk to another offender. Well, who the hell do you think they do talk to? You don’t exactly walk into Macy’s and say, ‘Hi, my name is Dan. Will you be my friend?’ It doesn’t fly real well. So what we’ve done is create the group, and in three years I’ve had only two people go back, both for technical violations.

“Having said that, murderers are the least likely to offend. They’re like people who have been through combat together who feel they can’t talk about what they want to with everybody. So they share experiences with those who understand them. But eventually they grow beyond that and they realize they can talk to the salesperson at Macy’s and perhaps become friends. It’s a process.

“Now having said that, there are a lot of barriers that must be faced, and we’ve become a less-tolerant society, despite the fact that most religions are based on redemption. And you talked about people of color. Well, go to the Northside of Minneapolis and there are probably three women for every man because the guys are off in jail somewhere because of whatever, or they don’t have jobs because of criminal records, or they’re living on the streets.”

Referring to the mutual benefit that can come from groups Dan Cain described, Pastor Ken Lewis

offered:

Ken Lewis: “Mutual encouragement can happen so transparently in a group like that and many churches are doing it now. They’re saying it’s not just about showing up on Sunday to worship with us. That’s important, too. We need to have that experience of worshipping. But we also need to have smaller groups and people need to be part of them. But some people will say, ‘Oh, you can’t bring somebody with his bad record into a small group.’ That’s not necessarily true.

One of my very best friends in my whole life – in fact he just visited us from South Dakota – grew up on the streets of L.A. and spent time in jail. He was mainly on heroin. Kind of a rough character.

“The more dysfunctional the individual, the fewer external support systems they have, the more religious affiliation is important in their transformation.”

But God has done something in this guy’s life and I love him like my brother. This is the way the church ought to be and can be. ‘Come on in. Sure you’ve got a history. You have this, you’ve got that. But come on in.’ And then you encourage one another.”

Sarah Walker: “Prison Fellowship has taken positions recently on voting restoration. They have started supporting sentencing reduction, both at the federal and state levels. They support ‘Ban the Box.’ The irony for me is that Evangelicals have

done a better job of reaching out and individually pulling offenders back toward faith. What I see among faith-based liberal groups is that while they take positions on voting restoration and the like, their behavior towards offenders is often patronizing. These groups hold offenders up as symbolic gestures that they're not racist and that they care about racial justice rather than incorporating them into their lives and worlds of faith."

I asked what groups are more likely to have members visit offenders in jails and prisons.

Sarah Walker: "The Evangelicals, absolutely, have done a better job. They have a much longer tradition of doing this and it's their mission to evangelize."

Bill Doherty: "Yes, it's in their DNA."

Peter Bell: "I see a continuum at work. The more dysfunctional the individual, the fewer external support systems they have, the more religious affiliation is important in their transformation. That's true not just in corrections but also in education, for example. I know of no deeply dysfunctional individual who has had a long-term turnaround in his life outside of a deeply religious context. The left says, 'We just have to have better training programs and better this and better that.' I agree about the need of such programs, but they are not transformational, they're technical. But if offenders are 'saved,' they'll be able to find their way to programs and other things."

Sarah Walker: "You need both job training and transformation."

Peter Bell: "As part of their journey, more time and thought need to be given to reintegrating

many young men with their children, and there can be theological and cultural components of this, of course. There are many men who feel a sense of regret about not being engaged with their children."

Bill Doherty: "They feel it. Most feel it. This will be controversial, but I would wish that clergy, particularly in congregations with a lot of single mothers, offered them a moral challenge: That unless a man is dangerous, that mothers open the door so that he can be involved in the lives of the children they had together. Maybe I would feel the same as many women in these situations do, that because he was bad for me, he must also be bad for the kids. But I've worked with many of these men, and they have changed their lives. They're hungry to get back. I have compassion for the mothers, but they might be missing the difference between her children's needs and her own."

I asked Professor Doherty if messages like this can be conveyed outside of religious institutions.

Bill Doherty: "Yes, but we have a very hard time in the social sciences, human services, and psychotherapy talking about moral obligations. Because what I'm saying to single mothers is, that unless the father is dangerous, unless your children are at risk being with him, you owe it to them to open the door. It's a moral obligation. But we don't talk that way in human services and the rest. When we human *servitize*, to coin a word, we become bureaucratic and provider-consumer oriented. We don't call on people to give back. We don't discern because we're so afraid of shaming and blaming people. In the legal system, there's a very high bar for a father to be banished from any contact with his children. He has to be pretty bad. Whereas outside the legal system, where most non-married parents are, it's often strictly the mother's judgment."



Katherine Kersten: “Is it useful here or at some other point to differentiate between men and women?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

Katherine Kersten: I’m thinking about the kinds of movies that appeal to young women versus the kinds of movies that appeal to young men, especially when considering people in the bottom half, including those who don’t have four-year college degrees. Charles Murray has written terrifically about them, as has Rusty Reno of *First Things*.

“I think women in those and other situations do long for marriage. They long for a Prince Charming. They long for somebody who will take care of them and be faithful. Men tend not to have an interest in those things. They tend to be much more interested in playing the field, to speak about it euphemistically. Of course many of them haven’t

“I listened carefully and then said flatly, ‘I don’t want you to divorce. This hurts me. It hurts your family. I love you all.’”

grown up by the age of forty these days. I think our messages to many of these young women and young men in the bottom half need to be different in some ways, as they don’t have the material rewards and careerism that tend to take the place of so much that used to be central in our lives as human beings.

“I’m thinking about this especially these days as I am watching the ‘Horatio Hornblower’ television series, which is set in the Napoleonic Wars. Horatio is this eighteen-year-old midshipman. I’m swept away by this guy. He is a gentleman who’s brave and noble and treats women with the greatest respect. It’s incredibly appealing to women today, I think. That’s why the Jane Austin novels are so appealing for people in the top half. But I don’t think Horatio Hornblower appeals to young men in the same way Batman or whoever does.”

(V) How can religious leaders and institutions strengthen and save troubled marriages?

Rhonda Nordin: “A dear friend called me earlier this year to tell me that she and her husband of many years were divorcing. I think she expected to find an understanding ear, at least a listening ear, which she did. I listened carefully and then said flatly, ‘I don’t want you to divorce. This hurts me. It hurts your family. I love you all.’ We’ve had additional conversations since that time; they are still together, still working on their marriage. She has thanked me for the forcefulness of a friend saying: ‘Don’t do this. It will hurt you. It will hurt your kids. It will hurt me.’ We don’t know the outcome, but among various voices, we need challenging ones.”

Paul Allick: “I’ve learned that my first response is you have to fight for your marriage. If your marriage is in trouble, you have to give every ounce of yourself to save it. I’m just up-front with people; if abuse is not at issue, divorce shouldn’t even be an option. I know there can be more support for people to get divorced than stay together. But if people fight to save their marriage, many will be able to do it. One of my nephews and his wife spent three years fighting for their marriage and it still fell apart. At that point I can say okay and walk with you in this.”

Bob Osburn: “We need to fight for marriages. By that I mean specific marriages. I can say my wife and I have done that. We’ve poured money and lots of time into several marriages trying to save them. And in almost every instance it was worth it. In two particular cases I’m thinking of, we fought when everybody else said, ‘split.’ Despite the powerful effect of modernity, I tell them, ‘Thus saith the Lord.’ These four words have to be used judiciously, but they can be powerful in resisting and neutralizing modernity’s effect.”

Bruce Peterson: “There has been quite a pro-divorce tide among therapists which has urged women to ‘not take it, stand up for yourself, and get out.’ It’s so easy to be a supportive ear. My psychologist wife Lissa can speak for herself, but

“If we are not comfortable with the notion of self-sacrificial love, then we are not comfortable with real forgiveness.”

she has come to see the flaws in this approach and has become much more challenging on the side of saving marriages, and I believe it has been very well received. She believes it has been very helpful to some people. Churches would discover good results if they worked harder at saving marriages.”

The title alone of a 1995 book by professor Doherty reinforces Bruce Peterson’s point about his wife’s practice: Soul Searching: Why Psychotherapy Must Promote Moral Responsibility.

Also pertinently, here is how Krista Tippett, host of National Public Radio’s “On Being,” made a very much related point when discussing her own divorce in Broken Bonds: “Everyone was incredibly supportive. I don’t think everyone should have been so unquestionably supportive. Religious communities could have stepped in and said, ‘What can we do?’ ‘How can we help?’ ‘You need to think about this.’ Religious communities could do this in loving but honest ways.”

After Katherine Kersten made a comment about the “transformational healing and happiness that comes with forgiveness,” and how “so few people are calling on us to forgive each other,” I asked, “Doesn’t just about every member of clergy talk about forgiveness just about every week? Isn’t that a staple of homilies?”

Katherine Kersten: “I can’t say I’ve heard it preached a lot, but it can often be superficial. It can be a cliché. If we are not comfortable with the notion of self-sacrificial love, then we are not comfortable with real forgiveness.”

Todd Flanders: “We tend to be really good at the ‘Forgive us our trespasses’ part. We’re not as good about the ‘as we forgive those who trespass against us’ part. We tend in Christian communities to confuse ‘forgiveness’ with generalized ‘acceptance.’ ‘Forgiveness’ is much harder.”

On another occasion Dr. Flanders said:

“In notes I wrote to myself before coming here I used words like ‘covenant’ and ‘sacrament’ several times. Religious leaders need to make clear that the language of “contracts” is not adequate to families. To the extent we see ourselves as autonomous, subjective wills, the idea of investing permanently in marriage is a much harder sell.”



Bruce Peterson: “The chances of seriously affecting divorce rates or unmarried birth rates are minimal. So a lot of my efforts have been to minimize the damage from divorce and unmarried parenting. A young married guy knows that his life is changing big time if he has a kid, as his priorities about friends, activities and other things change too. Unmarried guys don’t necessarily feel that way, as babies likely fit somewhere in their existing lifestyles.

“I’m thinking of a public ‘Commitment to Parenting’ ceremony which could be held in a church in which unmarried parents would commit to work with each other for the benefit of their children. I also believe in divorce ceremonies in churches to help people ease the pain and commit to co-parenting relationships for the sake of their children. I haven’t heard of any commitment ceremonies for unmarried parents, but my own minister does divorce ceremonies that are beautiful, about pain and lost hopes, but also about the good things, including their children and how they are not going to lessen their commitment to them. But in the hundreds and hundreds of divorces I’ve been involved in as a judge, I’ve seen very little of this done.”

Paul Allick: “I see people spending a year planning their weddings but avoiding their relationships. They also want to make up their weddings. I could argue I come from a 2,000-year history, with a little messing with it 500 years ago and that we have these traditions. But many people are not interested in those things, as this is about *them* and what makes *them* feel good and how special they want *their* day to be, rather than succumbing to a higher authority. The most beautiful weddings I’ve presided over are those where couples come in and say they want their wedding to be out of the Book of Common Prayer, because that’s why they’re in an Episcopal church. So I just throw all that in.”

Greg Marcus: “There is something unique and really good about being sent off by a congregation. I’m thinking about ads about jewelry for weddings. ‘He went to Jared.’ It’s intended as an indication of quality, some level of commitment. This guy took the time and contributed paychecks required to go there. But how much better would it be to market a congregation, before whom you make your vows? ‘They didn’t choose any church. They went to (fill in your own).’”

Joshua Borenstein: “In Orthodox Jewish circles, we put the bride and groom on a pedestal, both pre- and post-wedding. There’s some event or another where the whole community comes to wish them well and celebrate with them. But it’s not just, ‘We’re going to get married and form our lives together, and blah, blah, blah.’ By having the whole community celebrate, it has to send a subliminal message, if nothing else, that marriage is something unique and special and we’re all going to cheer for it and be happy for the couple.”

Rhonda Nordin: “I grew up Missouri Synod Lutheran in a small farming community in Iowa. I recall as a child going with my parents to celebrate anniversaries in the church basement. The church, 100 years old this year, continues this practice to this day. I am fortunate to receive the online church bulletin that lists the wedding anniversaries of its members. It’s rare to find a Saturday or Sunday afternoon that is not reserved from 2 to 4 p.m. to celebrate an anniversary – save during harvest season, of course. All one needs to do is call the ‘Anniversary Committee,’ which gets into gear to order coffee, lemonade, cake, and set up the fellowship hall.

“One never knows who will attend. It’s exciting to see who walks through the door as few are invited individually. Most see the public invitation that appears in the church bulletin, or

in the community newspaper, or they hear the announcement on the local radio. Observing wedding anniversaries is a *big deal*, especially for those who are elderly and look forward to the fellowship as well as the celebration. Bottom line: This church community celebrates marriage. They hold it up in high esteem. That stays with me.”

Pam Myhra: “Religious leaders should focus their attention on young couples before they get married so they know what they’re getting into, and counsel them when they have children.

“I think back to when I had my children. I had twins, and when they were 22 months old, I had another baby. A few months later my church offered a retreat for women, and I was so thankful. I really wanted to get away and have time with other women in fellowship. I was very excited and signed up to attend.

“But when the organizers found out I was bringing my baby because she was nursing they said, ‘We’re sorry. You can’t come.’ I’ve since thought, in all my life that was one point when my church truly missed an important opportunity to minister to me. Maybe more than any other woman, I was running on empty and needed the fellowship of adults, adult women. Sometimes it’s inconvenient to minister to people, but I think we get the greatest return from our efforts by ministering to young families when they are just starting off.”

Todd Peterson: “I recently attended a Jewish wedding, and as the man and woman stood under the *chuppah*, I heard one of the most profound wedding homilies I’ve ever heard, with the rabbi saying to the two of them: ‘You look beautiful. You came down the aisle together as two individuals. And after what we do here today, you will go back down the aisle as two individuals.’ How often

do we hear the romantic notion that something miraculous happens at that moment and the two individuals become one? What really happens is that a partnership of two individuals is formed and with a lot of hard work it will survive. With a miracle it might even thrive. I would hope that clergy deliver that message again and again and long before the wedding ceremony. Call it ‘premarital boot camp.’”

Don Samuels: “Religion has been feminized a bit, and religious leaders often don’t know how to talk to guys. We’re emphasizing the nurturing aspect of God and the nurturing and supportive aspect of community, and downplaying the edgier side of accountability, responsibility, courage, and sacrifice. Guys want to be tough, and they’re attracted to sacrifice, and one of the things I say to guys is that I’m the protector of my family. I defend my family. I say I live in the toughest neighborhood in the city, and if you’re a tough guy, you’ve got to come through me. And that the Number One arena in which I protect my family, the Number One enemy I protect my family from is me.”

I told Don he had me right till the very end and asked why he needed to protect his family from himself.

Don Samuels: “My first job as defender of my family is to protect them from myself, my ego, my insecurities, my oppression. I’m the defender of my children’s developing minds, my wife’s emotional vulnerabilities. I think that kind of language sanctifies relationships from a position of strength and sacrifice.”

Thomas Dufner: “Pope Benedict XVI made an interesting comment in his book about charity, that the work of the church is charity, whereas the work of government is justice. But we have it



reversed right now: The government is trying to do charity and churches are trying to do justice. Many people can find healing, growth, and personal accountability only from a church. But they don't have to improve and grow if government checks are automatic. So we're at a crossroads of redemptions."

I noted here that governments don't discern, but private institutions, especially religious ones can.

Near the end of his roundtable, Bill Doherty updated the group on "Marital First Responders," a grassroots project he has led the way in creating in Minnesota and elsewhere in the nation, building on an Australian mental health program. As he previously noted in Broken Bonds:

"We're not going to professionalize our way out of our [marital and other romantic relationship] problems. We could quintuple the number of professional marriage counselors and it won't be sufficient."

Bill Doherty: "Some churches are picking it up, though it doesn't have to be church-based. We recruit people who are natural confidants; people to whom others open up about their marriages and long-term committed relationships. We give them some training on how to be more confident, effective, supportive, and sometimes challenging.

"At my Unitarian-Universalist church, we're up to five percent of the adult population who have done the training, and we hope to get to ten percent. The idea is akin to having enough people in a group know first aid, so if someone starts to choke, somebody knows how to respond. More to the point here, Marital First Responders increases social capital so that if a person's marriage or relationship is not going well, there might be a friend better equipped and more willing to offer

perspective and support than otherwise might be the case. I have an African American doctoral student, Corey Yeager, who's doing an adaptation specifically for African Americans."

"I never got any help from the culture. The one place we found escape was in a church youth group for high school students, which was really beautiful."

(VI) What can religious leaders and institutions do about popular culture?

Participants talked exclusively about resisting popular culture, not changing it. No one was that audacious or quixotic.

Bruce Peterson: "My wife and I can hardly watch a TV show or a movie or anything without saying 'Yuck.' At the first sign of affection people are jumping into bed together. There's no thought of valuing and respecting anybody. I don't have a solution. I have a lament. The popular culture is just a steamroller, and as a parent I felt I was fighting it all the time. I never got any help from the culture. The one place we found escape was in a church youth group for high school students, which was really beautiful."

Todd Flanders: "If we go into a school simply condemning everything young people are engaged in, we get nowhere. And the good news is that not everything needs to be condemned. There are good movies out there. There's a lot of good music being made. We need to have an open and critical

engagement to help young people understand what we think needs to be understood, to pass on what we think needs to be passed on, that can help them separate wheat from chaff, good from bad, and ultimately good from evil.”

Katherine Kersten: “I’m probably the only one in the room who has seen the new *Cinderella*. It was fantastic, as it shows men and women in ways that women, at least, can identify with and really find attractive. There’s a nugget right at the beginning. Cinderella’s mother dies, but just before she does, she says there are two rules in life, and they’re wonderful: ‘Have courage and be kind.’ Five words and a thought that says it all. So Cinderella lives this way and triumphs over her evil stepsisters and she’s luminous, beautiful, very stereotypically feminine, yet very strong at the same time. It’s an absolutely lovely, uplifting film. There are so few people calling us to have courage and be kind today. So few people calling us to forgive each other, especially from the perspective that we are all broken.

“Churches need to talk about the inherent differences between cohabitation and marriage: One strives for unity, the other builds a ‘bit of separation’ into its fiber.”

“Thinking about our four children, and our youngest just turned twenty-six, it was much easier to raise kids when we raised them than today. There were no cell phones. It was such a different

milieu, the temptations were not what they are today. Nevertheless, there was plenty of bad stuff out there. My husband and I didn’t want to make the same mistake a lot of Christian parents do. They make their children fearful of the world, that it’s evil and the like, causing them to withdraw and be ineffective.

“So we decided that we would show our kids what we thought good popular culture had to offer. We went back showed them Marx brothers movies and that sort of thing. We also were able to do a lot with them and other members of our family at the cabin, where there aren’t any electronics. We’d play hearts and we’d have limbo contests. I don’t know how cheesy this sounds but truly I think most people when they get involved in such things find out they’re real fun.”

Rhonda Nordin: “We were talking before about ‘covenants’ and ‘contracts.’ Another ‘c’ word we need to talk about, in my opinion, is ‘cohabitation.’ The rates of cohabitation and ensuing children born outside marriage have grown astronomically. When I was in high school, cohabitation hadn’t been heard of; it was called ‘living in sin.’ I still think it is, though I’m not sure today’s churches refer to it as such, even though Scripture supports this definition. This is a stance that’s tough to take without alienating others since cohabitation is so prevalent among many, including family members and friends.

Churches need to talk about the inherent differences between cohabitation and marriage: One strives for unity, the other builds a ‘bit of separation’ into its fiber. Students need to understand the differences. They need to form an image of the type of relationship they want, and especially the kind of mate that will offer them the best shot at a life-long marriage commitment.”



Greg Marcus: “I would suggest this ties directly into how we value women. Churches have to do a better job of conveying to girls and women that they are created by a Divine Being, how important they are as females, and how they shouldn’t value themselves so little that they grab onto many guys, or any guy.”

Ken Lewis: “Talk to your kids. You’ve got to talk to them. I’ve got good kids. They are 40 and 37. They have their heads on straight, and they are raising kids with their heads on straight. And we’re just colossally blessed. Even when I was pastor of a large church with 700 people in Green Bay, we’d always eat supper as a family and we would talk. And they would talk back, and we would go round and round. Tell them the truth. You may not protect them from Madonna. My kids knew who Madonna was, but they knew what I thought of Madonna.”

This last comment was in response to my mentioning that radio host Michael Medved, in making a point about the pervasiveness of popular culture, has said that even Hasidic kids in Brooklyn and Amish kids in Pennsylvania know who Madonna is.

Bob Osburn: “We are faced with a tremendous internal defense problem where our families are concerned. We are weakening ourselves so much from within that the best external defense will not protect us. If we are willing to put massive amounts of wealth into military defense, and I believe in that, I want us to likewise put massive amounts of cultural capital into strengthening marriage and our families.”

(VII) Conclusion

Needless to say, questions of religion and faith specifically and cultural upheavals more generally are not the only factors involved in the weakening of marriage in the United States and large parts

of the rest of the world. The same holds when it comes to often extraordinarily high rates of nonmarital births.

Significant other factors are also at play, starting with how huge numbers of men – for reasons including educational failures, skill shortcomings, economic dislocations, criminal records, and various addictions – are understandably judged by huge numbers of women to be unmarriageable. And then add welfare programs that wind up substituting for fathers.

“Not taking advantage of our faith-based resources is akin to doing battle against widespread pain and sadness with a muscular arm needlessly tied behind our backs.”

But even if shortages of religion and faith can’t be said to be dominant causes of familial problems, that doesn’t mean their strengths can’t be better called on to lessen those problems. I haven’t used the language very much in recent years, but in American Experiment’s earliest days I routinely talked about how we, as a people, must take greater advantage of our religious traditions if we were to adequately help many millions of people in need, and that it was possible to do so in perfect harmony with both the Constitution and American variety. *Not* taking advantage of our faith-based resources, I argued, was akin to doing battle against widespread pain and sadness with a muscular arm needlessly tied behind our backs.

Evidently I still believe so.

About the Author

Mitch Pearlstein's new title is Founder and American Experiment Senior Fellow, having served until recently as the Center's president for its first quarter century.

His most recent books are *From Family Collapse to America's Decline: The Educational, Economic, and Social Costs of Family Fragmentation* and *Broken Bonds: What Family Fragmentation Means for America's Future*. A former editorial writer for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, he also has served on the staffs of former Minnesota Governor Al Quie and former University of Minnesota President C. Peter Magrath, as well in the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the U.S. Department of Education. He is currently chairman of OAK (Opportunity for All Kids), Minnesota's leading school choice organization.

Dr. Pearlstein did his undergraduate work in political science at Binghamton University and earned his Ph.D. in educational administration at the University of Minnesota. In 2006, the College of Education and Human Development at the U of M named him one of 100 "Distinguished Alumni" from the college's first 100 years.

He is married to the Rev. Diane Darby McGowan, a police chaplain and deacon of an Episcopal parish. They live in Minneapolis and have four adult children, six grandchildren, and currently only two dogs.



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Center of the American Experiment's Minnesota Policy Blueprint delivers a wide-ranging set of policy recommendations aimed at enabling all Minnesotans to thrive in their personal and financial pursuits. These recommendations are grounded in the firm belief that broad prosperity depends on free enterprise, personal initiative and a limited, frugal government. The Blueprint represents American Experiment's most strategic, comprehensive, and ambitious effort to shape and shift public policy in Minnesota. The full set of recommendations can be found at the Center's website, AmericanExperiment.org.

