

February 20, 2007

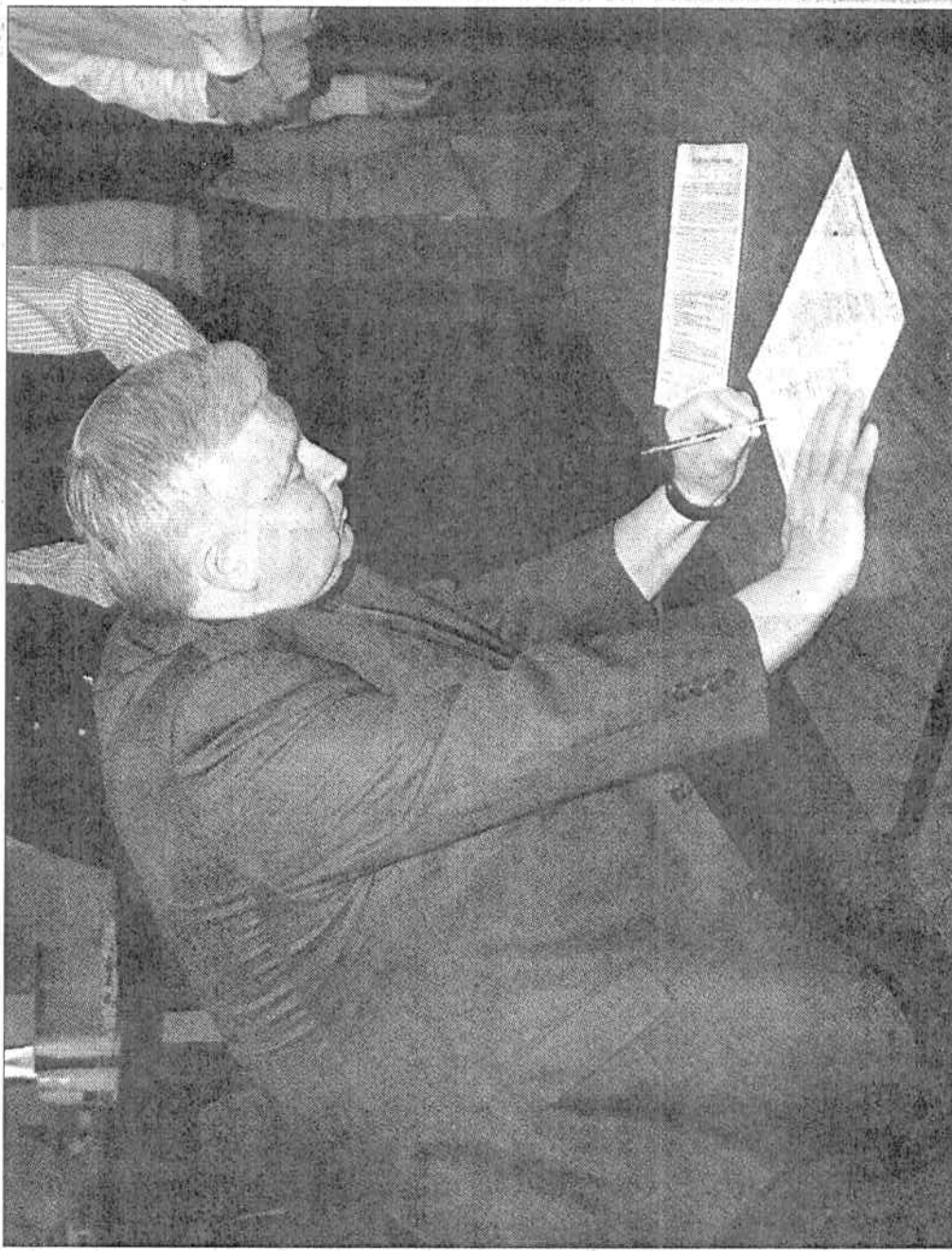
the Beacon



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JOE COTTAM OF St. Mark Lutheran in Sheboygan signs the Sheboygan County Marriage Covenant at the Mead Public Library. Story on page 3. — Beacon photo by Joelle Steffen

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County pastors vow to make great marriages

by Joelle Steffen
for The Beacon

SHEBOYGAN – Pastors from 16 denominations in Sheboygan County joined together on Valentine's Day and signed an agreement to protect marriage.

This year, Valentine's Day fell on the last day of National Marriage Week (Feb. 7-14), making the timing of the event, a mass signing of the Sheboygan County Marriage Covenant, most appropriate.

So far, 49 pastors from 16 denominations have signed the marriage covenant, which outlines five areas that these pastors agree are important to help prepare engaged couples for marriage.

Charlene Lammers, executive director of Great Marriages for Sheboygan County, briefly outlined the five areas at the event, which was held in the Rocca Room at the Mead Public Library.

The first point, encouraging active participation in the church, was elaborated on by Pastor Les Kuiper of Christian Reformed Church in Oostburg.

He said that one of the reasons for the high divorce rates among couples who marry in the church is because they're not committed church members.

"It's fairly easy to become a part of the church and people have various reasons for being apart of the church, so it's natural that they

should reflect the culture," said Kuiper.

The second area is a minimum waiting period of four months from engagement to marriage.

Guest speaker Jeff Meyers of Christ Lutheran Church in Overland Park, Kan. said that he encouraged pastors to extend that period to six months or more if they could.

The covenant also outlines four pre-marital counseling appointments, a signing of a declaration of love and an agreement to attend post-marital nurture sessions a year after the wedding.

"It kind of calls attention to the significance of the covenant they are entering into upfront," said Kuiper.

Six years ago, Kuiper formed a similar covenant and worked to get Oostburg area pastors to sign on. When Lammers found out about the covenant, she undertook to involve all county pastors, forming Great Marriages for Sheboygan County.

"We're here to address the broken families and reduce divorces in this county," said Lammers.

Lammers quoted statistics saying that 86 percent of marriages in the U.S. start in the church; however, despite the origins, about half of marriages currently end in divorce.

Lammers said that since so many marriages begin in the

BY THE NUMBERS Cohabitation

30	percent of cohabiting couples who have been previously married,
1200	percent increase of unmarried couples from 1960 to 2000
50	percent of those in their 20s and 30s who cohabit,
1.3	median duration of cohabitation in years,
8.2	percentage of Mormons who cohabit, the least of any religion,
32.5	percentage of Jews who cohabit, the most of any religion,
44.8	percentage of non-religious Americans who cohabit,
62	times more likely a woman is to be assaulted by a live-in boyfriend than husband,
3	times more likely a cohabiting woman is to be depressed than a married woman,

1. VanGuchem 2005; 183 2. Bumpass & Lu 1998; Bumpass & Sweet 1989; Sweet 1989 3. Bumpass & Lu 1998; Wu 1995 4. Mims 1999 5. U.S. Department of Justice 6. National Institute for Mental Health

church, then it's the church's responsibility to find the cause of these divorces and to promote stronger marriages.

Meyers and another guest speaker, Leroy Sullivan of Bread of Life Outreach Church in Kansas City, Kan., outlined how the covenant can help area churches promote marriage.

"Divorce is a systemic problem in our society," said Meyers. "It's the root cause of almost every social ill. Getting to the root cause is dramatically the thing we need to do."

Meyers encouraged the pastors to think of each marriage as

strategic. "It's not a 50-50 proposition," he said. "You can change that statistic."

Meyers said that in the 10 years since he and Sullivan started enacting the marriage covenant in their community, divorce rates have dropped 40 to 50 percent in their area. He added that in the more than 100 wedding ceremonies that he's performed, only two have ended in divorce.

"I know our culture doesn't always care about what works all the time," he said. "They have more felt needs."

Meyers said that one of these

felt needs is trying out marriage by living together, or cohabiting. Meyers described cohabitation as a cancer.

"It's the worst thing they can do," said Meyers. "There's not been one study that shows the positive effects of cohabitating before marriage."

Sullivan also encouraged pastors to take a strong stand against cohabitation because it weakens the image of the church.

Meyers relates Sullivan's words, "I'll never forget what he said, 'In our culture, in our church, in our city, the church is like the emperor with no clothes. She thinks she's all that, but society looks on her, and she's naked. This (the covenant) puts clothes on her.'"

Meyers said that if a couple lives apart during the four to six month before marriage, then the relationship will have a better chance.

"They can begin to build the skills of friendship," said Meyers. He explained that common wisdom says that cohabitating before marriage is smart because it allows each person to see if they are compatible before marrying.

"They think they're doing the right thing," said Meyers. "They're trying to practice, but

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GUEST SPEAKERS PASTOR Leroy Sullivan and Pastor Jeff Meyers (left to right) have worked together for 10 years, travelling around the U.S. to discuss the success of the marriage covenant in their area.
—Beacon photo by Joelle Steffen

Pastors discuss cohabiting before marriage

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marriage is one shoe that you cannot try on before you buy it."

Meyers explains that cohabitating can develop limiting patterns of thought that follow a couple into marriage.

For example, because a cohabitating situation is a loose commitment, once married, the couple may continue to be in an "as long as this makes me happy" instead of a "to death do us part" mindset.

Meyers said that in a successful marriage, the couple isn't trying to find compatibility but building it, but that cohabitating before marriage can damage that building process.

Lammers added, citing statis-

tics that show how unsuccessful cohabitation, even that which leads to marriage, is.

"The breakup rate of cohabitating couples is 85 percent," said Lammers. "Forty percent of these couples break up before marriage and 45 percent divorce after marriage."

Sullivan added that this message should be brought to the cohabitating couples with love.

"We have been given the answer to the problems in our society, and we should bring them not with the stick, but with the hand of love," he said. "You can't curse those who you want to bless."

For more information, visit www.great-marriage.org.