

Local News

Marriage Encounter leaders predict rebirth of movement

By Lee Strong

In the mid 1970s, the Marriage Encounter logo was such a common sight at church functions that people jokingly said the stickers had become standard equipment on station wagons.

The familiar stickers gave evidence that the Marriage Encounter movement was enjoying spectacular growth during that period. From 1974 to 1976, an average of 1,000 people a year attended the weekend retreats. Between 1971, when Rochester's first Marriage Encounter weekend took place, and 1982, an estimated 20,000 married people, priests and religious attended Marriage Encounter weekends.

By the early 1980s, however, the number of weekends decreased, and fewer and fewer people attended. In Rochester, the movement reached its nadir in 1987, with only 37 couples attending three Marriage Encounter weekends.

This downward trend has ended in Rochester, according to Denis Stemmler, who, along with his wife Dee, has coordinated Rochester's Marriage Encounter since October, 1987.

Figures so far this year support his contention. Fifty-nine couples, three priests and three religious brothers have already attended weekends in 1988. Approximately 40 more couples have signed up for weekends scheduled to take place by June, and Stemmler predicts that between 200 and 300 couples will attend the nine or 10 weekends scheduled this year.

The resurgence of Marriage Encounter, Stemmler said, is due to increased efforts to promote the movement, and a recommitment of couples to recruit and support others for Marriage Encounters.

Last November, the Stemmlers and Father Jack Murray, CSB, Marriage Encounter's priest coordinator in Rochester, prepared a written plan to coordinate the movement's rebirth. In "Rochester Marriage Encounter: A Strategy for the Future," they called for the creation of cores, or small groups of couples and priests who have completed Marriage Encounter



weekends; advertising Marriage Encounter weekends in parish bulletins; and arranging for speakers to preach in parishes about the movement.

Perhaps the most ambitious part of the plan calls for promoting Marriage Encounter among couples who have made Engaged Encounter or who have gone through marriage-preparation courses. These couples will receive a letter and a follow-up phone call from a Marriage Encounter couple.

Accompanying that letter will be another letter from Bishop Matthew H. Clark, endorsing Marriage Encounter and the movement's efforts, and encouraging couples to attend an encounter weekend.

Bishop Clark wrote the letter January 29, following a meeting with the Stemmlers and Father Murray. In addition, he will be addressing a meeting of Marriage Encounter's Plenary Core, or regional meeting, Saturday, April 9, at Guardian Angels Parish, Rochester.

Stemmler is excited about Bishop Clark's support for the movement. "It's one thing for us to talk about (Marriage Encounter)," he noted. "It's quite another thing for the bishop to say something to offer encouragement — to affirm that what we are doing is an apostolic work important to the diocese."

Marriage Encounter leaders have never doubted, however, that the work of the movement is important to the diocese and to the Church, Stemmler said.

"We believe what we have to offer is a critical need in the world today," he said. "The modern world influences our people's values systems, moving them away from fidelity, commitment, (and) working through rough spots.

What we're doing is encouraging people to look at the values of self-denial, (and) working through the pain to discover intimacy and growth."

Father Murray likewise noted that the movement fills a gap in the Church's ministry to couples. "We look after the preparation for marriages and marriages that fail, but we do little for keeping marriages on an even keel," the priest observed.

Marriage Encounter's decline during the 1970s, therefore, came in spite of leaders' certainty of the program's importance — and the commitment and hard work of many dedicated people involved with the movement. Yet in one sense, Stemmler noted, encounter leaders unintentionally caused the decline themselves.

By 1978, the rapidly growing movement had begun receiving criticism, particularly from parishes. Critics claimed that people who became involved with Marriage Encounter tended to become involved with encounter-related activities, to the exclusion of parish-centered activities. According to Stemmler, the movement's leaders were being asked, "Are you creating a religion within a religion?"

At the movement's North East region meeting held at Iona College in early 1978, Marriage Encounter leaders examined the criticism of the movement and recognized that they were valid. The leaders decided to incorporate discussions of parish involvement in the weekends, and to encourage Marriage Encounter couples to get involved with aspects of the Church outside the sphere of Marriage Encounter.

"Unfortunately for the sake of Marriage Encounter, (this initiative) succeeded beyond our expectation," Stemmler remarked. Couples began focusing their attention on parish activities and cut back on recruiting new couples for future retreats. Soon, fewer and fewer couples were attending the retreats, and the number of Marriage Encounter weekends dropped.

The movement learned a lesson from its experiences 10 years ago, observed John Notebaert, who was one of the movement's leaders from 1985 to 1987. "We know now that we have to encourage couples to take a stake in Encounter, but we also urge them to get involved in their churches."

The emphasis now is on balance, Notebaert said. "I don't think we'll get back into that situation again," he predicted.

One situation Rochester's Marriage Encounter movement is experiencing again is rapid growth. That growth has already begun to attract attention from outside the diocese, Stemmler noted.

"Rochester is one of the shining stars in the movement because of the resurgence," Stemmler said. "(My wife and I) just came back from Albany and they're mimicking us, adapting what we're doing to their own area." In fact, he noted, priests from Albany and Toronto have already attended Marriage Encounters in Rochester to study how the weekends are being run.

Stemmler noted that although the movement is growing again, complaints about Marriage Encounter becoming an all-consuming activity still linger — and might discourage some people from attending encounter weekends. Thus, part of the current efforts to promote the movement includes dispelling this fear.

"What we are offering people is a 44-hour experience, period," Stemmler said. "If they want to stay involved, fine, but it's not required. Our mission is the improvement of marriages, not perpetuating the movement."

Sisters of Mercy to host annual spring sale, supper

The Sisters of Mercy will hold their annual spring sale and home-cooked roast beef supper on Saturday, April 16, from 4 to 8 p.m. at their motherhouse and Mercy High School, 1437 Blossom Road, Rochester.

Supper tickets can be bought at the door or in advance by calling the motherhouse at (716)482-5442. Tickets are \$5 for adults, \$4 for senior citizens and \$2.50 for children under 10.

A family Eucharistic liturgy will be celebrated at 5 p.m. in the motherhouse chapel.

Bishop appoints Thanks Giving Appeal leaders

Bishop Matthew H. Clark has announced the appointments of Joan K. Ryan of Rochester as diocesan general chairwoman of the 1988-89 Thanks Giving Appeal, and Charles E. Hetterich of Naples as diocesan vice chairman of the campaign.

As general chairwoman, Ryan will be the senior volunteer leader of the appeal. With Hetterich's assistance, she will work with the diocesan appeal staff, the appeal director and the various TGA advisory committees in implementing the campaign.

Ryan served as vice chairwoman for the 1987-88 Thanks Giving Appeal. A graduate of Nazareth Academy and Nazareth College, she previously taught in the Rochester City School District. She and her husband, James D. Ryan, are members of St. Thomas More Parish, Rochester, and of St. Januarius Parish, Naples.

Ryan has served in leadership capacities with a variety of community organizations. She was a member of the Nazareth College Alumni Board, co-chair of the President's Society of Nazareth College, board member of the Rochester Philharmonic League, chairwoman of Fashionata 1984, chair for several years of the auctioneers committee of the WXXI Auction, and chair of the Annie Benefit for WXXI.

Hetterich is president of Widmer's Wine Cellars in Naples, and previously worked in management for many years with the R.T.

French Company in Rochester. He and his wife, Gloria, are members of St. Januarius, Naples. A native of Buffalo, Hetterich attended St. Bonaventure University and served in the U.S. Army.

Currently he serves as a member of the Advisory Board of Chase Lincoln First Bank; member of the Parents' Council of St. Mary's College, Notre Dame, Ind.; on the board of directors of St. Mary's Health Care Foundation, Rochester; president of the New York Association of Writers; Producers; and director of the Rotary Club of Naples.

Diocesan Appointments



Bishop Matthew H. Clark has announced the following diocesan appointments:

Father Raymond H. Booth from pastor of St. Christopher's Church in North Chili to pastor of St. Paul's Church in Webster, effective June 28.

Father Emmett J. Halloran from pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Church in Greece to pastor of St. Patrick's Church in Macedon, effective June 28.

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Total fee for a series of six lessons (including Dance Party) - \$10.00 per person

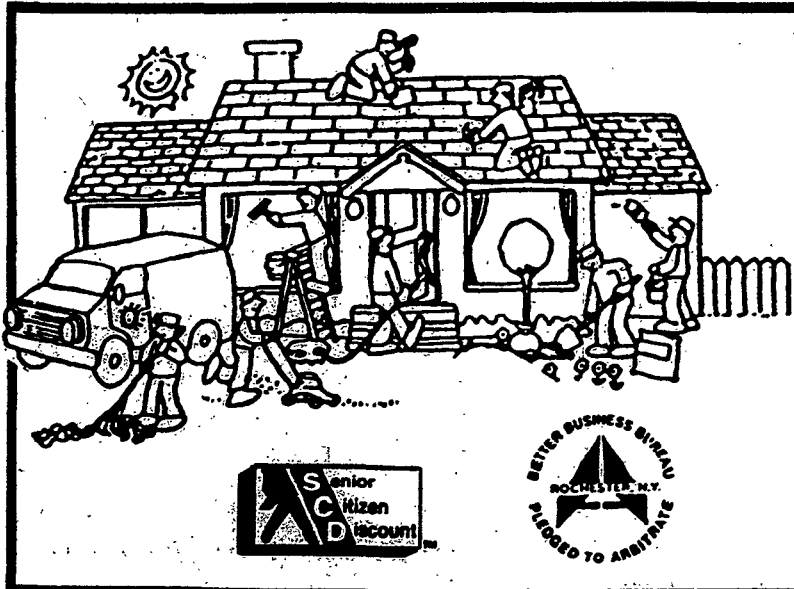
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