

MARRIAGE

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expectations, problem solving, communication, religion and parenting. According to Sister Dietz, FOCCUS is now used by most diocesan parishes.

Other marriage-related options offered by the diocese are a support program that pairs couples entering second marriages with mentor couples; and an educational program for teens on the sacrament of matrimony, now used in approximately 12 diocesan parishes and schools.

For couples who are already married, Sister Dietz encourages participation in such programs as Worldwide Marriage Encounter, in which couples seek to reconnect by taking part in weekend-long individual and group-sharing exercises; and Retrouvaille, which incorporates several components of Marriage Encounter but is specifically for troubled marriages. Worldwide Marriage Encounter and Retrouvaille, along with Engaged Encounter, are all private programs that are endorsed, but not operated, by the Rochester Diocese.

CONNECTING COUPLES, PARISHES

Last year at the parish level, a group of Canandaigua-area Catholic and Protestant churches began the Canandaigua Community Marriage Policy. Part of this initiative involves the training of mentor couples who minister to others wishing to improve their marriages. The policy also encourages married couples to take part in marriage-enrichment programs in their churches or community.



Frank Lepkowski holds the hand of his wife of 50 years, Joanne, as they renew their wedding vows Feb. 14 at Owego's St. Patrick's Church. Joanne said she believes marriages go through seasons. "Fall, winter, spring — there are times when you think love is gone," she said. "But because you're faithful to your vows, you work through it and soon realize another spring has come."

However, Sister Dietz said, there aren't a great number of parish-based support groups for married couples. D'Arcy, for one, said she's found that "it's very difficult getting that group of people to commit to meeting on a regular basis. It's because of the children and everything going on in their lives."

But Sister Dietz said this reality doesn't make the need for such an outreach any less significant. "I really challenge parishes to think of something. We have to be really creative, and our invitation has to be more than just in the church bulletin," she said, observing, for example, that parishes could provide child-care services so married couples can attend support-group gatherings.

erings.

Meanwhile, D'Arcy said the Tioga parishes offer several ministries that could easily include married couples even if they're not specifically targeted toward marrieds. Among those options are small Christian communities; a newly

formed young-adult ministry that welcomes married couples; and the opportunity to volunteer as mentor couples for marriage preparation. D'Arcy added that the Tioga parishes' Stephen Ministry — an outreach for people who are experiencing difficulties — has assisted couples in troubled marriages.

Even without specific programs in place, Sister Dietz said that parishes must always be encouraging toward engaged and married people. "I think it's got to be done through building relationships," she said. "At 9 on a Sunday morning, a couple should be able to look across the church and know at least one or two other couples they've met," she said, explaining that a struggling couple may benefit from befriending another couple "with a couple more years' experience under their belt."

Sister Dietz added that this support must come from all corners of the parish — from the congregants, to the pastor, to the office staff.

"It starts with the person who answers the phone," she said, noting that just the tone of a receptionist's voice can sway a couple's perception of the church. "If we're not evangelizing to the young couple, they may say, 'I'm getting married here but I'm not coming back anymore.' We all have the responsibility of being welcoming."

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