

# EDITOR'S FOREWORD

I married fifty years ago. I am not married to the same woman I married in 1963. She has changed in many ways over these five decades, and so have I. Our marriage is remarkably different from when we were teenagers saying our marriage vows. I like the changes in our relationship, but they have not been without pain. Couple relationships can be difficult; witness the close to 50 percent divorce rate among those who are married.

Being married or in a committed relationship certainly has changed over the last four or five generations. People get married for different reasons now than then: love or emotional satisfaction was not a primary reason long ago; more likely couples were married for social or economical reasons. What constitutes a committed relationship today has changed over the years, and couples have struggled to keep up with the changes in society. Today partners frequently expect each other to provide intimate companionship that fills their spiritual, emotional, social, and sexual needs, even though marriages can rarely meet such high expectations.

*Empowering Couples* is written for pastoral caregivers and others who offer help to couples. It presents concrete ways in which respectful care can be offered to those in committed relationships. Duane Bidwell, who has served as both parish pastor and now seminary professor, assumes that most couples who come to spiritual caregivers for help do not need some sort of long-term couple or marriage and family therapy. Rather, he believes that most couples can benefit from anywhere from three to seven brief conversations. The task of the spiritual caregiver is to help them get “unstuck, on their feet, and back on track” (see the introduction, below).

Bidwell knows that couples have problems but assumes they have strengths as well. A task of the spiritual caregiver is to assist the pair to recognize these strengths and build on them. In the second half of the book, he describes five tasks that can help couples become empowered in their relationships:

- separating people problems and passions,
- mapping mutual influence,
- attending to teamwork,
- reclaiming partnership, and
- telling a new story.

*Empowering Couples* is not a book on marital therapy. Instead, it presents a way for spiritual caregivers to converse with couples; it is that narrative between couple and caregiver, and within the couple relationship, that is important. As Bidwell points out in his introduction, “My overarching goal with this approach is to allow partners to create a covenant friendship strong enough to resist forces that threaten relationship.”

In *Empowering Couples* the author draws from the writings of the desert fathers and mothers of the third to sixth centuries to inform spiritual care to couples. He correlates desert spirituality with narrative therapy and shows how spiritual caregivers can help couples see what “passions” are influencing their relationship negatively and keeping them from loving each other fully. Bidwell uses the couple research of John Gottman to inform his own method of spiritual care, while also drawing from narrative therapy to present a practical way for couples to strengthen their relationships and make them more rewarding.

I am confident that a reading of *Empowering Couples* will strengthen and enrich your spiritual-care ministry. Bidwell brings to his work the wisdom from years of offering and teaching about marriage counseling both in the parish and as a seminary professor. The scope and quality of the care you offer to others is certain to benefit from his knowledge and sound guidance.

Howard W. Stone