

HOUSES OF WORSHIP

Close Encounters of the Engaged Kind

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From rings to registries and videographers to wedding planners, getting married is an estimated \$161 billion industry in the U.S. But preparing for lifelong commitment often seems to fall by the wayside when couples are presented with the pressing concerns of party planning: Should the candy-coating on the dessert almonds be the same color as the dinner-menu cardstock?

This week, Hollywood takes the focus off of "bridezillas" and puts it on marriage preparation courses. In "License to Wed," which opened Wednesday, Robin Williams plays the "Reverend Frank," a clergyman of unspecified denomination who puts his charges through a series of tests -- including an exercise in the diapering of urinating robotic twins -- to earn the right to marry. Off the silver screen, marriage preparation courses are about shared values rather than simulated disaster drills, and are increasingly popular.

For a couple to marry in the Catholic Church, marriage preparation -- also called Pre-Cana, referring to the wedding in Cana, where Jesus turned the water into wine -- is mandatory in most parishes. One-on-one meetings with a priest or lay minister are standard, but intense retreat weekends run by groups like Catholic Engaged Encounter, which served nearly 16,000 Catholic couples nationwide in 2006, are encouraged by some parishes as an extra measure of introspection.

On a Catholic Engaged Encounter weekend, discussions on self-awareness, openness in communication and decision-making in marriage begin the weekend, followed by conversations about sexuality and intimacy (including the Church's teachings on reproduction), forgiveness and the practical issues of finances, careers and responsibilities.

Engaged Encounter -- an outgrowth of Marriage Encounter, which provided similar counseling to married couples -- was founded in 1974 and is now an international program offered by many churches, including Assemblies of God, Episcopal, United Methodist and Lutheran groups. Its Web site mentions the still-high divorce rates in the U.S. and the need for good communication skills to ensure a strong union from the start. But there's limited research on the success of marriage preparation as divorce prevention. According to a 1999 Center for Applied Research for the Apostolate report, nine in 10 couples who attended a Catholic Engaged Encounter weekend said they learned important skills for their marriage, and in a one-year-anniversary follow-up, more than three-quarters reported that they felt prepared for the challenges they faced.

Still, there is an element of self-selection here: The type of person who would participate in a marriage course, or who is practicing the faith enough to meet with a religious counselor before marriage, would probably be less likely to divorce regardless of the extra preparation.

It certainly can't hurt, argues Sue Edwards, who, together with her husband, Dave, served as president of Lutheran Engaged Encounter International for 23 years. "It gives couples permission to talk about difficult subjects. On this weekend you'll open new doors."

Marriage preparation is not mandatory in Judaism, although individual rabbis may organize several discussion sessions before the ceremony. Rabbi Richard F. Address, director of the Department of Jewish Family Concerns at the Union for Reform Judaism, advises couples to spend five or more sessions engaging in conversations with their rabbi. In addition to discussing what role Judaism will play in couples' marriage and family life, he also encourages them to get tested for genetic diseases common among people of

Ashkenazi Jewish descent, including Tay Sachs. "Being armed with knowledge helps making decisions later easier."

While most courses encourage the soon-to-be-weds to get to know each other on a deeper level, other classes focus on the how-to's of marriage: Orthodox Jews may learn how a woman should purify herself after she has menstruated and before resuming sexual activity, while "natural family planning" courses explain birth control methods approved by the Catholic Church.

Within the Muslim community, formal marriage preparation is practically nonexistent, according to Munira Ezzeldine, author of "Before the Wedding: 150 Questions for Muslims to Ask Before Getting Married." Traditionally, a marriage was arranged by the parents, and while the young couple would get to know each other well only after the fact, close family ties and community networks held most couples together for life. Today, as those networks loosen and second- and third-generation American Muslims become culturally assimilated, divorce rates are on the rise. Ms. Ezzeldine is working with imams nationwide to encourage premarital investigations. "Marriage is not always easy and it's OK to talk about it in advance."

Written surveys are popular ways for celebrants of all denominations to assess a couples' compatibility before they take lifelong vows. For instance, the FOCCUS inventory, an acronym that stands for Facilitating Open Couple Communication, Understanding and Study, compares a couples' relative rate of agreement on topics important to relationships. Lee Williams, a professor of marital and family therapy at the University of San Diego, has found that FOCCUS can predict marital success after five years in nearly three-quarters of the couples surveyed.

"License to Wed" paints a terrifying picture of marriage preparation courses as bizarre rituals that a couple must endure to prove their worthiness. Certainly rabbis, pastors and priests have the right to refuse to marry a couple they don't believe is ready for marriage, but most courses simply reinforce a couple's commitment to marriage.

"Up until you break that glass, you can walk away," said Rabbi Address, citing a symbolic part of Jewish marriage ceremonies. "But

once you are married, there's a whole new universe. The challenge is to translate the blush of love into to the little things of real life years later."

Ms. Whelan is the author of "Why Smart Men Marry Smart Women."