

# Workshop offers 'survival kit' for married couples

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**A**IKEN — Marriage is a spiritual path, uniquely designed for each couple. Even though it is impossible to know all the challenges a couple may face, "Christian Married Life: A Sincere Gift of Self-Marriage Course," is a program provided by the Diocese of Charleston that helps couples assemble a survival kit to live out their covenant through the good times and the bad.

Deacon Robert Pierce and his wife, Donna, from St. Mary Help of Christian Church in Aiken, facilitate the course with five other couples in their parish. The three-day program is held one Saturday a month for three consecutive months and is offered twice a year in Aiken.

Donna Pierce said that when she and her husband were first approached to be facilitators she did not think they could find the time to do it. She began to feel more confident about facilitating after she reviewed the teacher's manual and saw how well it was laid out.

"We just can't not do it because it is so needed today," said Donna.

The director of Family Life Services and pastor of St. Mary Help of Christians Church, Father James LeBlanc, understands the value of having this resource in his own parish.

"How thankful I am for the good hearts and the time spent by the married couples in my parish who have worked hard to prepare themselves to provide this workshop," said Father LeBlanc.

In the first Saturday session, a corresponding workbook was given to everyone with activities to do in class and at home. Three major topics were covered during the May class: "Married Love," "Sharing What's Important," and "The Vow You Will Make."

The couples were asked to state what ingredients were needed for a healthy marriage and to show how family values like understanding, communication, respect, honesty and forgiveness were simple and practical expressions of love.

Deacon Pierce considers humility as a foundational value for marriage because it allows you to walk in truth.

"When you are humble, you resist the urge to put yourself first. You suppress the desire to have all the answers, and humility also helps you with forgiveness," said the deacon.

Donna added that marriage is not always 50/50 but sometimes it is 100/0,



CNS FILE PHOTO BY DON BLAKE, THE DIALOG

and in those times, the one spouse must carry the other.

Missy and Karl Othendal, also facilitators, did humorous skits that showed the importance of understanding. Karl played the role of insensitive John who ignored the feelings of his wife, Mary, played by Missy. Participants smiled at a scene very familiar to them and could see more clearly the hurt of the other person.

various activities. They discussed several key components to being a good listener such as attentiveness, willingness to understand, open-mindedness, self-control, patience and sensitivity.

Missy spoke about the importance of sharing values that are "noble and everlasting" so their union will be noble and everlasting instead of holding on to weak and superficial values that "crumble under stress."

"Crisis reveals the character of the union," said Karl explaining that problems, crisis, and tension do not cause divorce but "challenges the values that bind the relationship."

In one of the activities relating to shared values, couples had to individually answer the question, "What does a child mean to you?" Cynthia Gaither from St. Anne Church in Rock Hill

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**Missy Othendal**  
facilitator

wrote that a child is "God's plan for the future and his love and commitment to us. Children are a true blessing." Her husband, James, independently described children as "the future, the hopes and dreams of the couple, truly a gift from God."

This session also went into detail about theological, cardinal and moral virtues and how they are "good habits" that bring happiness to others.

"Since my ordination, demands for my time make it hard for me to practice these virtues," said Deacon Pierce, "but when virtues are lived out, it helps unite the spiritual and physical powers of a person."

"I think this course is very helpful and informative. It prepares couples for real life things that we don't usually think about, but things we need to address," said Wincia Anderson from St. Mary Help of Christian Church.

"I like the program because it is centered on the fact that God is going to be present and that he comes first," said Michael Vello, workshop participant.

"I feel like for the first time marriage is being treated like a vocation, and I like that," said Vello's fiancée Wendy Wescott.

"In order to understand others, you have to understand yourself. You will understand yourself better if you see yourself in God's eyes," said Missy. She described the desire of the human heart for intimacy and perfect understanding but to remember that only God can completely fill that need.

The participating couples worked on their communication skills through