

Lead Weekend Marriage Seminars

Incarceration puts a terrible strain on marriages. A 2004 study (“Incarceration, Marriage, and Family Life,” Princeton University) shows that prisoners attain the 50 percent divorce rate of the free-world population in about one-third the time.

Steve and Donna Varnam know first-hand how stressful incarceration can be. They had been married only five years when Steve was sentenced to five years in federal prison, leaving Donna to raise their four children alone. The Varnam’s credit the survival of their marriage to their Christian faith and a Prison Fellowship marriage seminar they attended while Steve was incarcerated.

When a couple is separated by incarceration, they both become two very different people. “A great percentage of couples don’t make it after they start living back together,” Donna explains. Studies show that close to 75 percent of marriages dissolve after an ex-prisoner is released.

This is why it’s important to address marital issues early on so couples can discover and apply biblical principles, allowing God to redesign their marriage. For families experiencing the crisis of incarceration, a weekend marriage seminar could provide the perfect blend of hope and spiritual guidance.

After Steve’s release, the Varnam’s became part of PF’s family ministry, leading weekend marriage seminars both inside prisons and on the outside for ex-prisoners and their spouses. Though many of these seminars are led by couples who have experienced prison, this is not a requirement for becoming effective facilitators.

The primary requirement for volunteering as a marriage seminar facilitator is having a healthy marriage and being willing to share what you have learned. You are not expected to be a marriage expert, but to simply share your own struggles and joys of marriage, creating an atmosphere for couples to improve their communication and reconciliation skills.

PF’s *Planted by the Living Waters* marriage seminar curriculum provides detailed guidance on preparing to lead the 10-hour seminar. If you and your spouse feel called to become marriage seminar leaders – either inside prisons or post-prison – consider these pointers:

1. While helping couples beat the odds stacked against them, the instructor-couple’s first priority is to bring hope in the person of Jesus Christ.
2. *Planted by the Living Waters* provides easy, step-by-step instructions on leading a seminar offering creative ideas for activities, insightful small-group discussions, and fun ice breakers.
3. Key topics include building a Christ-centered marriage, developing trust, and resolving conflict. Donna emphasizes, “Keeping things simple is important since emotions are complicated enough.”
4. When instructor-couples reveal a trial or share a testimony from their own marriage it helps deepen rapport and connections with participants. “After sharing our testimony,” Donna points out, “the room always feels more relaxed.”
5. Seminars conclude with a ceremony giving couples an opportunity to rededicate their lives to Christ and to each other. “We’ve brought flowers for husbands to present to their wives,” Donna says. “It’s always a special service!”

To speak to PF staff about your interest in starting a marriage seminar ministry, call 800-251-7411.