

# **The Post and Courier**

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## **Program aims to help churches save marriages**

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Mike McManus is an imposing figure in the tiny ballroom at the Residence Inn Marriott in North Charleston. A slide-show presentation glows from the front wall. McManus expertly delivers his hourlong presentation. It's like watching an infomercial. He could have been selling wonder mops.

But he's not.

About 30 Charleston area church leaders were brought together by Heritage Community Services to be sold on Marriage Savers, a program developed to help churches reduce divorce rates.

Heritage Community Services is an organization devoted to abstinence education. It contends that abstention from premarital sex produces better marriages and stronger family relations, which is an important aspect in child development. This idea spawned Heritage's South Carolina Healthy Marriage Initiative. Heritage wants to help couples have successful marriages by making marriage counseling and education programs easily accessible. Heritage received a \$50,000 federal grant to meet this purpose, and Marriage Savers is the solution Heritage proposes.

Mary McLellan, director of the healthy marriage initiative, said the group researched many good marriage programs but chose Marriage Savers because it wanted the "biggest bang for the buck." Marriage Savers presentations are scheduled to be given in six South Carolina cities: Charleston, Greenville, Florence, Columbia, Greenwood and Rock Hill.

McManus has been writing his syndicated column, "Ethics and Religion," since 1981. In 1983, he realized his column was not having the effect on people that he wanted. He developed the idea of Marriage Savers as a way to reach out to communities and make a positive change. McManus does not claim to be an expert, but says that in writing his column, he researched many issues pertaining to marriage.

In the beginning, he invited himself to speak to church congregations with no result. "I fell on my face the first couple of times," McManus said. When he spoke in Modesto, Calif., his words stuck. Marriage Savers was implemented there in 1986 and, according to an independent study by the Salt Lake City-based Institute for Research and Evaluation, it contributed to a significant drop in the divorce rates.

Since then, Marriage Savers has been adopted by churches from more than 30 denominations in 190 cities nationwide. Marriage Savers works through churches to organize, draft and implement Community Marriage Policies. Community Marriage Policies are designed to unify church policy on marriage in a community so that couples wishing to be married cannot "shop around" for churches. The Community Marriage Policies are firm. Couples go through at least four months of premarital counseling, can't cohabitate and are urged to abstain from sex prior to marriage. Marriage Savers also promotes training individuals married for at least 15 years as "mentor couples," who can supplement marriage counseling.

Marriage Savers emphasizes FOCUS, a pre-marriage inventory test, which helps couples gauge if they can realistically have a happy marriage.

McManus said FOCUS helps solve problems before they happen and helps prevent "bad marriages."

The program comes with support material, such as manuals, DVDs and workbooks, many of which are the work of McManus.

The audience of about 30 at the Residence Inn seemed to like what they heard from McManus. His presentation was interrupted only by a word of encouragement or an emphatic amen.

Ollie Rounds, state superintendent of Sunday school for Mt. Sinai Holiness Church of Deliverance in Charleston, said that he hopes churches in the Charleston area will adopt the Marriage Savers plan. "I think it could do a lot of good," Rounds said, "Everything could benefit from it."

Some of the church leaders said they planned to meet to draft a Community Marriage Policy, an important component of Marriage Savers.

If enough area churches sign on to the policy, a public signing would be scheduled for April 22.

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