

## **Couples in Christ Small Group Ministry for Married Couples Launches at the Church of Saint Paul in Ham Lake**

Even before John and I were married, we had a passion for “someday” working with married couples. After 12 years of marriage and many ideas later of what this “someday” marriage vision would look like, we are heading up a married couples’ small group ministry at our church along with another couple, Lisa and Bill Barta.

The ministry is called Couples in Christ and is officially launching to the larger parish of Church of Saint Paul’s in September 2009. The purpose of the ministry is to form small groups of married couples focused on growing Christ-centered marriages by providing them with ongoing education and inspiration to build their marriage through biblical principles within the Church of Saint Paul community. Married couples growing closer to God, each other and other couples in the church is the vision.

Pastor of the Church of Saint Paul Fr. Jon Vander Ploeg sees the great need that this ministry serves. He was supportive when the Bowers and Bartas approached him three years ago about the idea of starting a married couples’ ministry at the church. They all agreed that it would be best to have a grassroots approach toward growing the ministry by starting with one pilot group led by the Bowers and Bartas that would meet together for a year or two first before introducing it to the parish.

“Couples in Christ is a good support and encouragement for married couples. I was impressed with the way that the couples involved shared their lives in appropriate ways with one another that helped them grow in their faith and relationship with one another. Couples in Christ has helped those involved to focus on building up their marriage by the little choices they can make each day and walking together through the joys and challenges of married life,” according to Fr. Jon.

The idea originated at a marriage conference hosted by Family Life, a national Christian organization dedicated to strengthening marriages and families, which the Bowers and Bartas attended together in 2006. It introduced their Homebuilders Couples Series® designed to strengthen marriages, develop supportive relationships with other couples, and help spouses discover timeless principles from God’s Word that can be applied to their marriage. Both couples committed to working together to start a group like this at their church.

While the Bowers wanted to start a marriage group to grow their own marriage as well as fulfill their “someday” dream, the Bartas wanted to do so that they could keep their marriage a priority. “We have been married for 18 years and thought that being a part of a marriage group would enhance our relationship,” according to the Bartas. “We have found friendship and support from other couples and have grown in our own spirituality as well as communication skills. We are constantly learning from the other couples’ experiences and being encouraged in our relationship.”

When forming their group three years ago, both couples reached out to some couples they knew and some they had never met. Janae reflects on this significant process. "I recall many meetings with the four of us being very intentional about what type of couples we would invite and praying for guidance on who we should ask. I asked God for a sign to reveal the couples we should ask by seeing them outside of the church. So we followed this sign from above and approached the two couples that we had never met before that we saw outside of the church at a sports event for kids and the state fair. They said yes!"

One of the couples "divinely" asked was Steve and Angela Landry who have been married 8 years. "We joined the marriage group because we wanted to grow closer to each other and closer to God. With children and our jobs, it's hard to find time to 'work' on our marriage and this group provides a good opportunity to do that. It has helped our marriage because we now take time to focus on the importance of our marriage and how God wants it to be. It also helps that the couples in our group pray for each other and hold each other accountable."

The other divinely approached couple, Brandon and Brigit Voss, has been married 8 years. "We wanted something to focus our marriage on that intertwined God in it. Being with people that wanted the same thing was a must!"

The Voss' then invited Mike and Kristin Jordan, married 9 years, to join as the final couple that rounded out the pilot group. "We joined our Couples in Christ group to get to know other couples in the parish who had a similar desire to grow in their faith and relationship with each other. It has forced us to set aside time that is dedicated to better understand God's plan for our marriage as well as our role as parents. We've come to value the opportunity the group provides for us to share the successes and challenges we all face in our marriage."

The pilot group meets monthly for a few hours and studies a Christian resource on marriage with homework assignments for each couple to complete before the next session. They also attend a yearly weekend retreat together at one of the couple's cabins. The opportunity arose to share their group's experience and larger ministry vision for the parish with a booth after masses one weekend earlier this year followed by an informational session in which 10 couples attended ranging in length of marriage from one year to more than 30 years.

From this exposure, two other groups have formed this summer each having 5-6 couples per group. Married for 12 years, George and Heidi Ball share their reason for wanting to part of the Couples in Christ ministry and for leading one of the two new groups recently formed.

"We have had the benefit of being a part of couple's groups for the last 10 years as part of a different Catholic organization. Through these groups, we experienced great growth in our spiritual life and in our marriage. When you have small children, the chance to get out on a weeknight together is very rare. We often reflected how excited we were just to drive to the meeting together and have those precious minutes alone to talk. Beyond the drive, the time with other Catholic couples who were truly seeking God's will in their life was a real anchor in our lives.

When we heard about a chance at our church to join new couple's group, we couldn't miss the opportunity. Due to various reasons, we had not been in a group for over a year at the time, and we both missed the time together with other married couples to discuss our faith and our challenges as husbands and wives, and to have a group of other couples to help hold each other accountable to living a common way of life.

We both believe that having a committed group of couples that meet regularly and share their faith and challenges together is a sure way to grow deeper in your walk with Christ. Our current group at the Church of Saint Paul has a wonderful variety of life experiences. In our few months of meeting regularly, it is clear that God has a purpose for this group and has brought us together for a reason. We are very thankful that we have had the chance to get re-connected with a solid couple's group through the initiative that has started at our church."

In September all three groups, along with those couples interested in starting their own groups, will come together for an evening of enrichment led by Fr. Jon and ministry leaders – the Bowers and Bartas. The evening allows the groups to meet each other and share more about their group. (While the ministry has guidelines for forming new groups, each group has the opportunity to structure it in a way that fits best for all the members of the group.) Another goal of the session is to introduce the U.S. bishops' marriage initiative and available resources.

According to the Bartas, "Now reaching out to the larger church with Couples in Christ was a natural progression as we wanted to share with others the benefits we found in being a part of a small group. It has truly been a blessing to be a part of Couples in Christ!"

The Bowers couldn't agree more. "We are so grateful that we still believed in this "someday" vision and that God's answer to our prayers with Couples in Christ was more than we ever expected."

*Janae Bower is one of the co-founders of Couples in Christ ministry at the Church of Saint Paul. She is also an award-winning author, inspirational speaker, training consultant. Her company Finding IT ([www.FindingIT.com](http://www.FindingIT.com)) helps others get to the heart of what matters most. To find out more about the ministry, contact Janae at [janae@FindingIT.com](mailto:janae@FindingIT.com) or 612-554-1367.*