MARRIAGE CATECHUMENATE

"Get Started" Parish Training Guide

Office of Family Life & Discipleship
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To the Clergy of the Diocese of Lincoln,

The Office of Family Life & Discipleship has created a *Marriage Catechumenate Hub* that can answer majority of your questions. This website offers a "Parish Implementation Checklist", FAQs, and lists all the forms you need that will you get started.

Start here:

1. Review the **Marriage Catechumenate Hub**
2. Choose your parish model (Witness to Love, FOCCUS Facilitator Couples, or your own model)
3. Begin with your next engaged couple

For all forms, resources, and checklists for parish volunteers and staff:

SCAN THE QR CODE -->

All forms are also categorized on **Clergy Resources on Teams under Marriage Preparation.** (i.e., canonical and clergy checklists, registration forms, brochures, and couple checklists) If you have any questions, please refer to this contact sheet that will help you know who to contact with any questions you may have.

Thank you for your patience as we roll-out the Marriage Catechumenate in our Diocese,

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Catholic Diocese of Lincoln

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Detailed Implementation Checklist

Getting Started

Please review the Diocesan Marriage Catechumenate Guidelines for diocesan requirements and timeline expectations. To track each couple's progress, use the Marriage Preparation Record Checklist (for Standard Preparation & Convalidations).

Step 1: Parish Discernment

☐ Decide which lay accompaniment model your parish will use and get trained

- ☐ Option A: Witness to Love Mentor Couples
- ☐ Option B: Premarital Inventory Facilitator Couples

(Option C – use both options or create your own method for lay accompaniment with approval).

☐ If considering Witness to Love, order a Parish Review Pack to evaluate the program

☐ Discern a Marriage Formation Coordinator(primary point of contact who guides couples and supports mentor couples). A clergy may do the role easily if you have few weddings, but most often, the priest delegates it to a deacon or a married couple. (If you have less than five weddings a year, you may qualify for a virtual coach instead through the WTL Hybrid Experience. It is best used as a *temporary bridge* not a longterm solution. The cost is $195 per couple, vs $115).

☐ Determine who will administer the premarital inventory.

Step 2: Training & Certification

If using Witness to Love:

☐ Purchase Certification Course for your designated coordinator. (Self-Paced Online Certification with Training Videos – 1 HR. If your parish has a WTL subscription, you may access the free training videos, please contact familylifeoffice@lincolndiocese.org)

☐ Complete the Clergy Training Short Course (15 min) – for priests, deacons, and parish leaders

☐ You may also review WTL's Help & Support (FAQ) page

If using FOCCUS (or another pre-marital inventory) for lay accompaniment:

☐ Train a facilitator couple to facilitate the pre-marital inventory:

- ☐ FOCCUS Facilitator Training or contact Fr. Coulter for in-person training

Step 3: Build Your Parish Marriage Formation Team (WTL Only)

☐ For High Volume Wedding Parishes: Recruit mentor couples (WTL) to serve as ***showcase couples*** **(a pool of vetted couples a couple can choose from if they have no options or no one to ask)** (Note: showcase couples are a back-up option, not the standard practice.)

☐ Ensure parish staff and volunteers understand the new marriage preparation process. A Marriage Catechumenate Hub was created for parish volunteers to watch the diocesan information webinar, review forms, and listen to a pastor's testimony.

Step 4: Parish Set-Up + Rollout Meeting (WTL Only)

☐ Schedule your first Marriage Formation Team meeting with clergy, marriage formation coordinator, and a wedding coordinator if you have one. You may use this Get Started Parish Guide as a meeting template.

☐ Schedule a 1:1 implementation call with a Witness to Love Parish Support Specialist to review best practices and answer any questions specific to your parish, or email parishsupport@witnesstolove.org.

☐ Finalize Fee Structure and Order Materials (Two Options):

- ☐ **Option 1: Parish Bulk-Ordering (Most Standard):** Parish orders a Engaged Couple Set per wedding (2 Workbooks for Bride and Groom, 1 Mentor Workbook & *Mentor's Journey* Guide, digital app/video course licenses for both the engaged couple and their mentors). The parish either subsidizes half the cost as part of its marriage ministry budget (e.g., KofC scholarship or woven into budget), or bundles the cost in an initial marriage preparation or church fee. (e.g., $150-250 covering church facility maintenance, administrative cost, and the full WTL kit)

- ☐ **Option 2: Couple Purchases Materials Directly:** Parish absorbs no cost and the couple purchases directly through this link: Engaged Couple Set (Purchased by Individual Couples) – Witness to Love. You must send the couple's this link prior to the first coaching meeting.

☐ Set up access to the WTL Manager Dashboard to add/track couples, assign online video courses, and track progress.

☐ For High Volume Wedding Parishes: Get more help. The Marriage Formation Coordinator (MFC) may choose to train showcase couples or facilitator couples to be stand-in coaches (so the marriage formation coordinator does not have to do every coaching session)

☐ (Optional) Provide formation resources for showcase couples (e.g., Mentor's Journey or encourage them to watch Beloved on Formed or the free "Be More Marriage Retreat"). You may also offer your coordinator The Road to Family Missionary Discipleship book as a gift.

Step 5: Parish Launch (WTL Only)

☐ Choose a **Launch Sunday** for the MFC or clergy to make pulpit announcement at every mass announcing the Marriage Catechumenate to the parish. Utilize bulletin announcements, Flocknote, or social media ("You may be asked to be a mentor couple…") to promote.

☐ Initial Meeting with clergy: Couple receives *10 Steps to Get Married*, NFP Brochure, and canonical investigation. For WTL only: the clergy introduces the mentor couple concept: *"Instead of assigning you a couple you don't know, you will choose a married couple you admire to walk with you through this process."*

☐ Optional: Offer Rite of Welcome after Initial Meeting and introduce the couple to the parish community at the end of the next Sunday Mass. This is a great opportunity for the engaged couple to meet other couples to perhaps find a mentor couple.

☐ Couple selects mentor couple of their choice (if using Witness to Love). The priest/deacon reviews the core requirements for choosing mentors:

- Married in the Catholic Church for at least 5 years (if a couple is married less than 5 years, but seems ideal, use prudential judgement case by case)
- Regularly practicing their faith and attending Mass every Sunday.
- A couple the engaged couple looks up to and admires.
- Cannot be parents or immediate relatives.

☐ Marriage Formation Coordinator (MFC) schedules first coaching session with engaged couple and mentors at the MFC's home and distributes materials/app access.

☐ Begin premarital inventory process (recommended prior to retreat)

☐ Couple completes Engaged Encounter Retreat or approved formation course

☐ Mentor couple and engaged couple meet 6x (ideally, once every 3-4 weeks) for Witness to Love Mentoring, and additional sessions for premarital inventory facilitation

☐ Clergy conducts a "Theology of Marriage" pastoral check-in with the engaged couple (post-retreat) to confirm readiness and understanding of the Church's teaching on marriage

☐ For WTL: This is *Session 5: Theology of Marriage Discussion Night*

☐ For inactive, poorly formed, or lapsed Catholics, use the "This We Believe: Prayers and Teaching of the Catholic Church" pamphlet or find it on Clergy Resources.

☐ You may opt to do a spiritual refresher 60 days before the wedding, or include Rites of Entry (Rite of Betrothal or Order of Blessing an Engaged Couple). See page 12.

Step 7: Post-Wedding Support

☐ Mentor couples stay connected with the newly married couple (informal expectation; the hope is they continue their friendship/support 1-3 years after the wedding)

☐ Invite newlyweds to parish events or small groups

☐ Encourage participation in diocesan marriage enrichment opportunities

START HERE: Most Frequently Asked Questions

Is Engaged Encounter required for everyone?

Engaged Encounter (EE) remains the standard retreat option under the diocesan policy. However, approved exceptions are permitted for convalidations and exceptions due to work, illness, childcare, age, distance, or other qualifying factors. In these cases, couples may fulfill the retreat requirement through an approved virtual, hybrid, or alternative formation option as outlined in the *Convalidations and Exceptions Guide.*

What lay accompaniment program should I use?

The Diocese of Lincoln requires one form of parish-based lay accompaniment under its new policy. *Lay accompaniment* is an umbrella term describing married couples walking alongside couples. The Diocese endorses ***Witness to Love*** or ***trained inventory facilitator couples*** *as approved models of lay accompaniment.*

How do I use both Witness to Love and FOCCUS?

If you use Witness to Love, completion of a premarital inventory is still required. Please refer to the joint resource document, created by *Witness to Love* and *FOCCUS* which outlines how to use the two together. *FOCCUS* is a premarital inventory that's intended to spot areas of disagreement. *Witness to Love* is peer-to-peer mentoring for long-term support and bridging into the parish. These tools are not interchangeable, but they are designed to work together. Witness to Love fulfills the lay accompaniment requirement and the premarital inventory is a separate requirement for assessing readiness.

How do I get trained in Witness to Love?

- If you wish to be trained in Witness to Love, please click: Certification Training on the Witness to Love Store. The cost is $45. Also available in Spanish.
- If you are still in discernment, please order a free Parish Review Pack here.
- After you are trained, the WTL Parish Support Team will reach out to follow up, answer any questions, and schedule a check-in within 3 months of training. For immediate customer service, please contact **parishsupport@witnesstolove.org**

Why does the Diocese only require an NFP Intro Course and not mandate the full course? Are pastors allowed to mandate it at the parish level?

Very few dioceses across the United States mandate the full NFP course, and our Diocese has historically never mandated the full course due to lack of instructors and compliance amongst users. Yes, the pastor does have wide discretion to mandate the full course (3-5 follow-up sessions after the intro course) under the parish policy. A great resource is NFP Basics, a short course for couples, which statistics show 70% who participate end up signing up for the full NFP course.

How do I train a couple in FOCCUS?

FOCCUS is offering virtual facilitator training.The new facilitators will get a new FOCCUS account set up, plus a training manual shipped to them.

What is the difference between mentor couples vs. "facilitator couples"? Do we need both?

- *Mentor couples* is a specific term used by Witness to Love.
- *Facilitator couple* is a term specific to facilitating pre-marital inventories, i.e., FOCCUS.
- In order to avoid confusion: it is recommended to keep the terms specific.
- Note: *An Inventory Facilitator Couple* can become trained as a coach to overview the initial WTL coaching session.

Who is the Marriage Formation Coordinator? What do they do?

The Marriage Formation Coordinator is recruited by the pastor to offer overall coordination of Witness to Love at the parish level. Their primary job is to coach the engaged couples and mentor couples in the overall process. They meet once with them both for a "coaching session" (1 hour) and give an overview of the process. They also register the couple, track progress, and order and distribute materials. This is not the same as the mentor couple role. If you have a high volume of weddings, the coordinator may coach facilitator couples or other parish volunteers to do coaching sessions with engaged and mentor couples.

What are the requirements? What is encouraged, but not required?

The clear requirements are listed under CDOL Marriage Prep Requirements, listed on Clergy Resources. Please implement a structure that is both flexible and adaptable to your local parish needs, which is why our policy allows pastoral discretion.

How do I make Witness to Love widely known in my parish?

- You can purchase a WTL Parish Promotional Packet (50 for $60, 100 for $86, or 150 for $141); includes bulletin/pulpit announcements, brochures, pew cards, daily examen prayer for couples. Or you can write your own annoucements.

What about convalidations and irregular cases?

An updated Convalidations & Exceptions Guide and a Clergy Checklist for Convalidations is listed on Clergy Resources under "Forms for Clergy."

Marriage Catechumenate Workshop
Office of Family Life & Discipleship

Parish Planning Template:

Part 1: Current Landscape

1. What is your parish's current process for marriage preparation?

_____

2. What strengths does your parish already have that can support the catechumenate model? (e.g., mentor couples, active ministries, hospitality team)

_____

3. What challenges or obstacles do you anticipate?

_____

Part 2: Equipping the Team + Parish Launch

1. Who is a potential marriage formation coordinator? (Volunteer coordinator, staff, etc.)
Note: Parishes with less than 5 weddings/yr. qualify for a virtual WTL coordinator/coach.

_____

2. Who are potential showcase mentor couples? (vetted couples on the side if an engaged couple doesn't know anyone?

_____

3. What is a good team meeting structure? (Quarterly or bi-annual checkin/potlucks for team fellowship)

_____

4. Who are local partners that will help us? (nearby parishes, LDCCW, Knights, MSHF, etc.)

_____

Part 3: Mapping the Four Stages

Stage 1: Reception (initial contact / welcome / evangelization)

Main Goal: How will we make couples feel welcome and introduce them to the parish?

1. How will we welcome couples? (Letter from parish, Rite of Welcome, etc.)

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2. How will we introduce them to the parish community? (i.e., Rite of Welcome)

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3. Should we offer them a welcome gift if new to the parish? (candle, rosary, bible)

Stage 2: Catechumenal Phase (primary formation; trust & lay accompaniment)

Main Goal: How will we form couples practically, theologically, and relationally?

1. Which **"lay accompaniment model**" will we use?

   Option 1: Witness to Love Mentoring _____

   Option 2: Premarital Facilitator Couples _____

   Option 3: *Or come up with your own approved method*

2. Who will serve as facilitator couples if you use them? ***Note:*** Premarital inventory facilitator couples often serve as a ***"second mom or father"*** and help with a "wisdom gap." Name couples who could potentially serve in this role.

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3. **Schedule a Pastoral Follow-Up Conversation** (to replace the Private Catechesis of Marriage) or the Theology of Marriage Dinner Discussion Night (Session 5: Witness to Love) How will we check-in on their walk with Christ? Will you share your testimony?

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4. Our diocesan policy requires **one NFP Intro Course (virtual or in-person**). The pastor can require couples to take the full NFP course (3-5 sessions depending on the method) and has wide discretion to do so, if they choose under their parish policy.

   Fertility Awareness Intro Session (do you have a Fertility Instructor in your parish you can refer to?) Will you require follow-up sessions? _____

Stage 3: Final Preparation (spiritual synthesis, prayer, & final discernment)

Main Goal: How will we connect the sacramental reality and synthesize it all in last 60 days?

1) Couple's Prayer – Distribute to mentor couples to model for engaged couples during mentoring
2) Lectio Divina with Wedding Readings
3) Liturgy Planning
4) Confession (as close to ceremony as possible)
5) Optional Spiritual Refresher at the Parish Level. Examples may include:
    - Half Day Mini Retreat: Saturday morning, 8:30-12pm, (Mass, reflection on vows, couple reflection time, prayer with scripture, confession, closing blessing)
    - Evening of Reflection (sample agenda: Holy Hour or guided Adoration, witness talk from a married couple, reflection questions for engaged couples, handouts for couple's prayer, opportunity for confession, closing blessing)
    - Mentor Couple Gathering: Invite the mentor and engaged couples for a final evening together.
        - Topics include:
            - What have we learned?
            - What challenges do we anticipate?
            - How will we stay connected to parish life?
            - Prayer with the engaged couple and mentor couples

- End with optional **Rite of Betrothal or Blessing of an Engaged Couple** to close final discernment.

Stage 4: Mystagogy ("To Lead into the Mystery")

Main Goal: How will continue to accompany and integrate couples into parish life post-wedding?

How will we continue *walking with the couple after the wedding?* What option seems most feasible to do at the parish level?

Is there a point person or couple who would want to get small groups started for married couples?

Clickable Resource List:

Certification & Training:

- **Witness to Love Certification Training** - $45 - self-paced modules or get a Free Parish Review Pack first before you decide

  If your parish attended the in-person training or has already been certified, you may access the updated refresher training videos at familylifeoffice@lincolndiocese.org

- **FOCCUS Online Facilitator Training** - $195 – self-paced modules or contact Fr. Gary Coulter for in-person training dates.

Convalidations Resources:

- **Convalidations & Exceptions Guide**
- **Civil Marriage Initiative Starter Kit – Witness to Love**
- **FOCCUS Convalidations Inventory and Booklets**

Mystagogy Resources:

- **Missionaries of the Holy Spirit & the Family:** for the growing and mature disciple, a "seminary-like" two-year formation for married couples done at the parish level and in the home; contact **Chance and Lora Unger at mhsfonline@gmail.com**
- **Love & Life Programs:** for ongoing marriage enrichment; nine programs focusing on tools, workshops, and small group follow-up; **contact Matt and Marie Philips** (Hastings, NE) for more information for programs throughout the Diocese: **loveandlifeprograms.nebraska@gmail.com**
- **The Rule of St. John Paul II Married Small Groups:** small group leaders training available; for conjugal spirituality recommended for the early years, written by St. John Paul II, a rule of life for married couples. Contact
- **Worldwide Marriage Encounter**: **for ongoing marriage enrichment**; offers tools, dialogue, and workshops over a retreat weekend and ongoing small groups
- **Retrouvaille of Nebraska: for couples in crisis or renewal;** 3 phases of support via retreat& small groups; contact **nebraskaretrouvaille@gmail.com** for more info
- **REFOCCUS**: a specialized inventory and relationship-enrichment tool for married couples
- **Domestic Church**: Championed by JPII, an offshoot of a Polish movement, couples engage in monthly circle meetings, individual/couple/family prayer, and study. Equips spouses to transform their household into a true "domestic sanctuary"
- **Communio**: partnership with parish or diocese to increase marriage engagement. Free "starter kits"/digital toolkits to build Relationship Ministry in your parish.
- **Restore:** counseling-based emotional healing viritual self-paced course
- **Our Outpost**: created by two former FOCUS missionaries, "focusing" on transforming marriages into missionary outposts; online community & monthly formation portal w/ on-demand courses