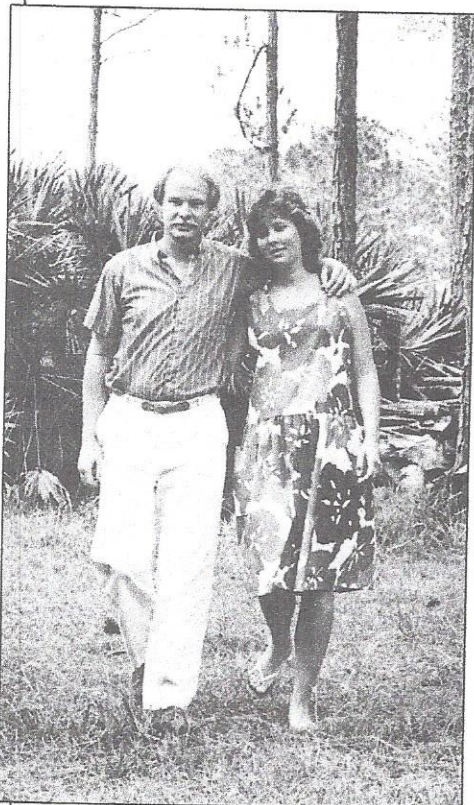


Our Marriage-Encounter Weekend

It was good to talk about our relationship in an intense environment where nothing else mattered. But we found that a marriage – encounter weekend may not be for everyone.

By MICHELE BUCKINGHAM



Note: The following is one couple's account of their participation in a Worldwide Marriage Encounter program. It is meant only to represent what they experienced on this particular weekend. Others may have different experiences and different results.

I distinctly remember asking my husband, Bruce, if we could go on a marriage-encounter weekend. I am certain that he said "yes" or at least "uh-huh." He, on the other hand, conveniently does not recall that conversation.

He has since made me promise never again to ask him anything until he has been home from work at least 30 minutes. After his hour-long drive from Kennedy Space Center to Melbourne, Florida, on the boring blacktop of Interstate 95, he is likely to say "uh-huh" to anything.

I hear him. I understand how he feels.

After all, I am now an "encountered" wife.

I'm not the only one. More than three million couples around the world have experienced "marriage encounter" since the first weekend by that name was held about 20 years ago.

Originated in Spain during the 1960s and imported to the United States in 1967, Worldwide Marriage Encounter is an international, non-profit organization. Its stated goal is to "enable couples with basically good marriages to enrich the quality of their lives" through improved communication and a deepened awareness of themselves as two people drawn together by God. Both "Dear Abby" and Christian psychologist James Dobson recommend it.

The organization works with a variety of church and religious organizations in more than 45 countries to sponsor the marriage-encounter weekends. Worldwide Marriage Encounter supplies the basic guidelines and churches tailor the details to their own faiths. The weekend Bruce and I attended was called an

For Bruce and Michele, *being encountered reinforced their young marriage.*

"Episcopal expression" of marriage encounter, offered by the Episcopal Diocese of Central Florida.

For each couple the marriage encounter experience is somewhat different, depending on any of a number of factors including age, length of marriage and spiritual maturity. Our own experience was undoubtedly colored by our unique circumstances: wed in our late 20s, very happily married for just under two years, baptized in the Spirit and active in the church, with our first baby on the way.

I was eager to learn how Worldwide Marriage Encounter could improve an already-good marriage. With the baby coming, our lives were about to undergo a great change. It seemed like a good time to take a close look at ourselves and our relationship.

On Friday evening at 7:30 Bruce and I arrived at the Canterbury Retreat Center, a beautiful lakeside facility located near Orlando, Florida, and run by the Episcopal Church. Several of the 21 couples signed up for the weekend were already waiting in the auditorium. I was surprised that the majority were relatively young—in their late 20s, 30s and 40s. Only one couple appeared to be older than 60.

We took our seats and waited for the rest of the participants to arrive. Soon, two couples in their 50s or early 60s took their places at the front table. One of the men was an Episcopal priest. He and his wife were the weekend's "clergy couple." The other couple and a third younger couple introduced to us later were "presenting couples." They would present the program during the weekend.

The speakers began to give us some idea of what we could expect from the meeting and what would be expected of us. For the entire time, they told us, husband and wife were to focus only on each other, not on the other people in attendance or even on the beautiful scenery surrounding the retreat center.

For this reason we were encouraged to move about in "loving silence," avoiding conversation with other couples. We were also instructed to stay only in the auditorium, in our private rooms or in the dining hall at meals. We were not to go outdoors, where nature would be a distraction. We were also asked to remove our watches to prevent clock-watching. Our meeting schedule would be regulated by knocks on our door and the ringing of special bells.

Bruce tapped my shoulder. "Do you notice something?" he whispered.

"They're not speaking to us, they're reading to us from scripts."

He was right, and soon a presenter explained this method. The three couples leading the marriage encounter were not professional speakers, he said. And since there was so much important information to relay, reading from scripts helped ensure that they didn't leave anything out.

Quickly, we fell into a routine. For about 40 minutes the clergy couple and one of the presenting couples would discuss some aspect of marital communication, relating stories from their own lives as illustrations. Then, in a notebook we had been given, we would write a question presented to us by the speaker, such as, "Why did I come here this weekend?" or "What do I like best about my spouse?" The wives, alternating with their husbands, would then go "in loving silence" to their private rooms to write their answers in their notebooks. The husbands (or wives) would stay in the auditorium to write theirs. About 10 or 15 minutes later a bell would ring, then the husbands and wives would meet privately in their rooms.

In our room Bruce and I would exchange notebooks, reading each other's message twice—"once for the head and once for the heart." Then, using a technique simply termed "dialogue," we discussed the feelings we had expressed. Usually, within 15 minutes or so, a loud bell would ring, calling us all back together for another cycle of presentation, question, reflection and dialogue.

Bruce and I did become a bit restless. But we were pleased with the conversations being sparked by the speakers' questions. We talked openly about our feelings for each other, our disappointments, our fears, our hopes and dreams. We talked about death, and we discussed our sexual relationship.

We had always thought our communication was quite good—better than that of most of the couples we knew. We always talked freely about any matter of concern or interest. As Bruce pointed out to me on Saturday night, in our one-and-a-half years of marriage we already had talked about most of the weekend's subjects and probably would have discussed the rest of them eventually.

Still, it was good to talk about these things *now*, in the setting of an intense atmosphere where all that mattered was listening to each other. Putting our feelings in writing also was valuable. This method forced us to think deeply about our relationship and gave us a freedom of expression that we found exhilarating.



At home in Melbourne, Florida, Michele and Bruce Buckingham reflect upon their marriage-encounter weekend.

The presenters discussed the differences between the world's ideas about marriage and God's view of marriage. We were encouraged not to live as "married singles," living separate lives while sharing the same bedroom. Instead, we should develop the kind of attitude toward our activities that gives top priority to our time together as a couple.

We were told to think of our relationships with our spouses and our relationships with God as parallel. If we are hateful toward our partners, then our love to God will also be disrupted. It is also likely that the things we feel we can't share with our mates are the very areas of our lives we are having trouble committing to God.

Bruce and I awoke on Sunday morning feeling quite positive about the weekend up to that point, and we felt very close to each other. Although we had undergone no revolutionary change, our relationship had been positively reinforced.

For many other couples, however, the change was radical. At breakfast, many husbands and wives sparkled with happiness. The "loving silence" rule was now relaxed, and several couples shared

with us how much they had learned about each other and how excited they were about the future of their marriages. Some admitted they truly had been "married singles," out of touch with one another. Others said that while they once had difficulty expressing their feelings to their spouses, through dialogue they now had found the means to break through the barriers that had stood between them.

However, as Sunday continued, the weekend took a different turn. The focus switched from couples, marriage and communication to Worldwide Marriage Encounter itself—and support money for the movement.

One session centered entirely on finances—not ours, the organization's. Having previously sent in our \$20 registration fee, we had clearly understood that we would have an opportunity to make an additional contribution at some point in the weekend. But we were not told until that moment in the program that the estimated cost to the organization of our attendance was \$230 per couple!

It never occurred to us that the figure would be so high. But could we contribute less without feeling we were

sponging on the organization? Let me make it clear that the speakers tried hard to assure us we were not being "pressured." In fact, we were told that donations given by a previous marriage encounter group had already paid for our weekend. Our money, in turn, would guarantee that another meeting could be scheduled.

The leaders clearly stated that we didn't have to contribute anything if we couldn't afford it, and that no one would ever be turned away because of lack of finances. Still, we couldn't help feeling responsible for at least meeting our own costs. And we wished we had known the total cost in advance.

With this bad taste in our mouths, we went hesitantly into the next session. The presenters' enthusiastic speeches now seemed to fall flat: We—the community of "encountered" couples—were "the hope of the world." We had "couple power." We could "make the impossible dream possible" through "couple love." We needed to "share the dream" with everyone we knew. What dream? The dream of an "encountered world."

Many of the couples were obviously moved. Several women had tears in their

eyes. Voices cracked. Husbands and wives wrote long lists in their notebooks of all the people they were going to tell to come to a marriage-encounter weekend when they got home. We wanted to join in their enthusiasm, but we couldn't.

It was no longer the money. We both sensed that while there had been much talk about God and the church during the weekend, somehow the final emphasis had been misplaced. *Jesus* is the hope of the world. Not Worldwide Marriage Encounter. Bruce and I felt that we needed to share more of Jesus and the gospel, and less of "couple power." Happy couples often do communicate God's love more effectively, but happy couples are not themselves the message. *Jesus* is.

We drove home that evening with mixed feelings. The people who had organized and presented the theme of the weekend were sincere, loving individuals. We genuinely liked them. Many positive things had been said and done, and we had come away knowing a little more about each other. We were happy for many of the couples who obviously had experienced great breakthroughs in their marriage relationships. Still, we could not shake our reservations.

Silently, I wondered if something was wrong with us. Why hadn't we responded like everyone else? Were we cynics? Penny-pinchers? Hardhearted?

No, these weren't our attitudes. True, Bruce hadn't wanted to go at first. But once we were there, we both listened and participated with open minds and hearts.

In the end we came to a conclusion that many marriage-encounter enthusiasts will undoubtedly disagree with: This type of marriage-encounter weekend is not for everyone. For couples with good communication and a close relationship, the time, the trouble and the \$230 cost—whether they pay it or someone else does—is not worth it. For those couples who have fallen into a rut, who live as "married singles" or have communication problems, the benefits of the weekend are probably worth more than the cost.

Marriage encounter is one tool among others that God can use to draw couples closer to each other and to Himself. But Jesus is the One on whom we must set our hopes. ■

Michele Buckingham lives in Melbourne, Florida, with her husband, Bruce. They have been married for almost two years. She is a free-lance writer and book editor. She formerly served as a legislative assistant in Washington, D.C.