



Does Marriage Stand a Prayer?

UGA researchers Steven Beach and Tera Hurt want to know whether a prayer a day keeps the divorce lawyers away.

IN RELIGIOUS CIRCLES there's a saying: "A couple that prays together, stays together." University of Georgia researchers Steven Beach and Tera Hurt are trying to determine if that's more than a cliché. They're overseeing an unusual UGA study—the first of its kind, they claim—that explores whether a combination of standard marriage skills training and prayer can strengthen African American marriages. Beach and Hurt make an interesting team. He's white, married for twenty-six years with two sons; she is African American, with no kids and never married.

"To my understanding it is the first study of its kind that melds prayer and

skill-based education among African American couples," says Hurt, who serves as program coordinator and director for the project, dubbed Program for Strong African American Marriages (ProSAAM). The premise of ProSAAM, which includes 500 African American couples, is to determine whether there are measurable benefits of integrating prayer into marriage skills training. Beach and Hurt hope their findings will ultimately provide information that can help improve marriage among all races and ethnicities.

At a time when 41 to 50 percent of first marriages end in divorce, some might ask: Why isolate the challenges of African

American marriages? In response, both Beach and Hurt point to statistics showing that African American marriages face the greatest challenges of all ethnic groups. Recent stats show that, of all races, African Americans are the least likely to marry; less than half of African American adults are married, compared with 81 percent of whites. And the African Americans who do marry report being less satisfied in their relationships and are also more likely to divorce than whites; 17 percent of white marriages end within fifteen years, while nearly half of African American marriages end within the same time frame.

These numbers, say Beach and Hurt, demonstrate scientifically that stable, satisfying marriages have "grown increasingly less normative" among African Americans. The impact, they say, trickles down into societal problems, including behavioral problems in children, widening health disparities, and poverty. "All of us who are involved [in the study] believe families are an integral part of creating a

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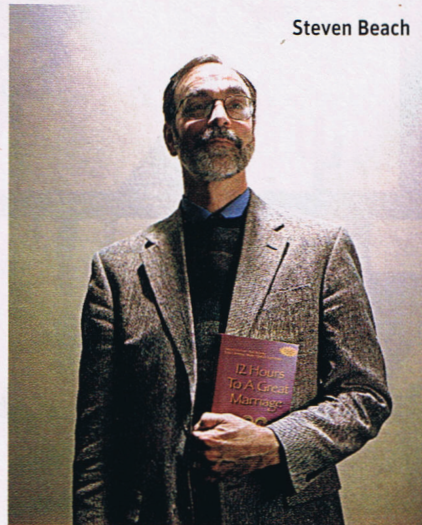
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Steven Beach



Tera Hurt

sense of self and strengthening communities and individuals within the community," says Beach, a UGA psychology professor who also serves as the director of the university's Institute for Behavioral Research. This project seems a natural extension of his career, which includes spending the past fifteen years studying the impact of depression on marriage.

Beach was inspired to develop ProSAAM after attending a Templeton Foundation conference on the role of forgiveness in marriage in Atlanta five years ago. "The researcher talked in a very direct way about the potential for the role of prayer in community-based intervention," he recalls. "I began to think about how the inclusion of prayer might be a way to strengthen marriages." He began discussing his idea with several colleagues, including Lily McNair, an associate provost for research at Spelman College, who pointed out that a tradition of religion and spirituality within the African American community, especially in the South, made black couples in the region an ideal study group. UGA's long-standing track record of tackling research projects aimed at strengthening families, Beach says, was merely icing on, well, the wedding cake. He applied for the two grants now funding the project, a \$1.1 million research grant from Templeton, which is a philanthropic organization that regularly funds studies exploring possible correlations

between faith and science, and one totaling nearly \$385,000 from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, which only underwrites the portion of the project not related to prayer.

Once funding was secured in 2005, Beach began searching for the right person to oversee the project, and Hurt, who holds a dual Ph.D. in Human Development and Family Studies and Demography from Pennsylvania State University, immediately came to mind, especially since her doctoral work had focused on intimacy within African American relationships. Getting her on board, though, took some convincing. She was in the midst of wrapping up a year of postdoctoral training at UGA's Center for Family Research and was considering a move back home to South Bend, Indiana, to be closer to her family, when Beach approached. "I was on the way to my office to make an important phone call when he pulled me into the conference room" to give her a copy of his grant, recalls Hurt, who says divine intervention is responsible for her change in plans. "The more I read it, the more I felt called to work on this project. I had to call my parents to break the news that I might be in Georgia a bit longer. I was thinking, 'Why did I have to walk past that conference room!'"

As program coordinator and director, Hurt ensures that the many parts of their project—a three-year undertaking that



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utilizes a sixty-member staff, including researchers, session facilitators, graduate students, and even childcare providers—work together like a machine. Along with helping decide which materials would be used in the study, she recruited and trained the staff and contacted churches, community organizations, and media outlets in an effort to attract participants for the study.

In the study, expected to wrap up later this year, couples were separated into three groups. One received materials on how to strengthen their relationship that included exercises they could complete at their own pace at home. A second group got the same information but also attended facilitator-led marriage skills group sessions covering everything from conflict resolution to techniques for improving communication. The third group attended similar sessions but also took part in group prayer with other couples and was encouraged to pray together as a couple at home. "This is not marriage counseling—it's marriage enrichment," notes assistant recruitment specialist Regero Sampson. "In a lot of relationships, the women do a lot of talking and the men do a lot of listening, but we teach them both how to communicate more effectively. This levels the playing field."

Hurt has taken her share of lighthearted barbs for overseeing a large-scale marriage study despite having never married. She says that in many ways, her work has impacted her chances of having a successful union in the future. "When people bring it up, I remind them that I only oversee the science of the project, I don't teach the sessions," says Hurt, who notes that her parents, James and Sharon Hurt, have been happily married for thirty-four years. "I must admit I've learned a lot more about what it takes to maintain a healthy marriage. Now I pray for my future mate to have the type of traits that will truly sustain a mar-

riage—not the superficial stuff we sometimes focus too much on."

As with any research endeavor, Hurt notes that this project includes several hypotheses, but she says the overall "spirit" of the research is that improved communication skills paired with dedicated prayer time among couples will enhance the quality of marriages.

The results of the study are not expected to be ready until 2009, but preliminary analysis is already suggesting that ProSAAM's impact has been positive. "I'm predicting that the couples that pray together will stay together," says Robert Wilson, who with his wife, Alice, was part of the group that attended the sessions that included prayer. Even after thirty-

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eight years of marriage and eight children, he says the sessions were helpful. "The more we learn about each other, the more we grow," he says. Alice, whom he nicknamed "the prayer warrior," agrees. "Prayer is the key to unity in a marriage," she says.

Once analysis of their findings is complete, Hurt and Beach plan to develop a program that can be brought to churches and other community programs that focus on marriage enrichment. LaTrena Stokes, who helped recruit couples and occasionally stepped in as a session facilitator, says the feedback she's received has been more positive than negative. Married for seven years, with two boys ages three and five, Stokes says: "We're not only encouraging them to pray but teaching them *how* to pray. A lot of times when couples get into a heated argument, they'll pray, saying, 'Lord, I need you to change him or her.' We teach them how to bring that back to the love of God, encouraging them to also look at themselves and to focus more on praying for their marriage." ■

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