

National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers  
25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference  
September 21 – 24, 2005  
Hyatt Regency McCormick Place  
Chicago, Illinois

**Then and Now – Retrospective and Prospective**

September 21, 2005  
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My friends, colleagues, fellow respondents to the call from Baptism to do as Francis of Assisi instructed: to “preach the Gospel daily and when necessary use words,” I am so happy to be here with you tonight as we open the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Conference of the National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers.

As a native Chicagoan, I also welcome you to my hometown, Chicago—“The City of Big Shoulders”—and the Archdiocese of Chicago, which hosts this milestone gathering for our organization.

25 years is a long time, whether it is the duration of a marriage, the tenure of employment or the life of an organization. So, at this marker of the life of this organization, it is good to be here, gathered before God, joined in light and reminiscent about the past. As we reflect on 25 years of NACFLM’s service to the Church in America, we recognize this as a moment of review and to renew, of looking back and of looking ahead, to affirm what we have accomplished and to assess what is yet to be done.

And when we have done all that, we will still find ourselves at the basic premise of our work: to assist families to abide in love and in God. It’s all about love – the love of God, which manifests in the fidelity of marriage, which persists in the perplexities of stepfamilies, which is revealed in the care of colicky babies, elderly parents, know-it-all and you-don’t-know-nothin’ teens, and the committed network of extended family. God’s everlasting, ever-reconciling, ever-finding-a-way-out-of-no-way kind of love is the sacramental life of families. And it is our privilege to serve them and to serve God through them.

Our Mission: “In response to God’s word revealed through all generations and impelled by our belief in the intrinsic sacredness of family life, we the members of the National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers join together to be a prophetic voice for family in Church and society, to foster professional development, and to provide mutual support for those who minister with families.”

The most strident phrase in this mission statement, in my opinion, is “to be a prophetic voice . . .” A prophetic voice. What does it mean to be prophetic. A prophet is one who foretells the future. A prophet is one who points the way to truth. A prophet is an effective spokesperson for God.

John the Baptist was a New Testament prophet. They delivered his head on a platter. Mohandas Gandhi and Martin King were 20<sup>th</sup> Century prophets. They were assassinated. If we take this aspect of our mission seriously, our life may not be in jeopardy, but we won’t avoid controversy.

Some will deem us crazy because of our hair-brain ideas. Ideas like finding the Sacred in the ordinary<sup>1</sup> messiness of family life.

Embracing at once the messiness and holiness of family is also embracing God, whom we can't fully understand. Family is holy even when it's a mess; God is God even when we feel disconnected from God and all we sense around us is darkness. The same faith that joins us to God bonds us to family.

Embracing the messiness of family life and honoring the family as worthy and holy—even when it's a holy mess—is a concept that flows through our veins. Advancing this concept of family is a hallmark of our organization and just one article of evidence of our prophetic voice.

At past conferences we have considered how what being a voice for families<sup>2</sup> means. We have explored enduring truths and changing realities of marriage and family life.<sup>3</sup> We have delved into the myth, meaning and ministry of holy families.<sup>4</sup> We have seen how we family life ministers are called to structures that facilitate and free.<sup>5</sup> We have come to better appreciate the kaleidoscope of changing families.<sup>6</sup> We felt the winds of promise in the interdependence of family and parish,<sup>7</sup> the church in the home and the institutional church.

Yes! Ours is a prophetic voice—prophetic to the larger faith community, prophetic to society, and prophetic to us, the NACFLM membership. Listening to that voice has pushed us and pulled us and changed us over the years.

Over the last twenty-five years we have evolved. At the inception of our organization we were the National Association of Catholic *Diocesan* Family Life Ministers. Wisdom had us remove the word “Diocesan” from our name, not just to shorten a name that was a bit too long, but also to open us to the possibilities of who we can be.

In the early years leadership was predominantly clergy and male. Today the laity make up the vast majority of our leadership, and our women colleagues outnumber the men.

This evolution didn't just trickle down. Thanks to the prophetic leadership in the early years—the leadership of visionary priests who pushed and pulled and moved over and honed new leadership among the laity—and to the talent and dedication of so many lay men and women, our organization is an example of strong lay leadership in the Church today.

So, today we are gathered here before our God, joined in the light of wisdom from our prophetic past. We come to a crossroad of sorts here in the central metropolis of our nation, where we celebrate our noble past and, driven by our mission, explore new possibilities to minister and prophesy to families and those who serve them.

One of the areas of opportunity is the growing Internet medium. I remember in 1996 when as a campus minister at DePaul I noticed that the new computer labs were almost always full. And the students weren't there just writing papers and doing homework. They were sending emails and instant messages to each other, in chat-rooms and listserves, participating in a community in cyberspace that we on the University Ministry staff were completely unaware of.

I also remember a particular time coming home from work a bit perturbed that our two phone lines were tied up for more than an hour. I had been trying to arrange for a ride home from the train station and couldn't get through to home by phone. After walking about a half-hour I got home, and there on the phone was my teenage daughter talking with a network of two-way callers, while at the same time in several Instant Messenger sessions on the computer. My ire

was tempered when I discovered that she was consoling friends and being consoled and having prayer after the sudden death of a friend.

Though we may think of good ministry as gathering the people, breaking the bread and telling the stories, we are seeing before us new ways that people gather—electronically. And it behooves us to be on board. As technology blooms and as our sophistication with it increases, so must our ministries expand. By what means do we deliver our services? What delivery systems are available yet underused, if used at all? This is our frontier, if you will.

Families today are mesmerized by a powerful media system with highly sophisticated marketing strategies. Large media conglomerates have very successfully evangelized families and indoctrinated them to a gospel of self-interest. As ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we must recognize that this is our competition. To compete smartly we must make use of the very tools that have made Disney, AOL-Time-Warner and others so successful—imaginative marketing and meeting families where they live. Instead of requiring them to come to us, we must go to them, and make it easy for them to taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

The monthly e-newsletter for newlyweds by the Family Ministries Office of Chicago is a byproduct of thinking outside the box to reach those we had considered to be unreachable. Now in our fifth year and after 61 issues, our subscription list is now over 12,000 and still growing.

Dr. Jim Healy's CD "When the Cake Is Gone: How to Get Married and Stay Engaged" makes use of a delivery system that young people readily use. We give the CD to every couple who attends one of our archdiocesan marriage preparation programs. We tell them to listen to it in the car on the way home. Then listen to it again after several months into the marriage. A CD is accessible in the car, at home, in the office, while on bike trails, while on the treadmill and just about anywhere.

Taking the FOCCUS Premarital Inventory online is a big hit here in Chicago. We have created a pretty elaborate process for explaining to the couples what the inventory is and what it's not, registering the couples, assigning facilitators and keeping track of the cases. The assigned facilitators negotiate with the couple a time to do the follow-up to the inventory. And, with the exception of the follow-up sessions, it's all done by email and online. It's very user-friendly and convenient.

Being prophetic is not just about attending to those who come to us—those who are present, those gathered. Avenues and processes of ministry designed for the mainstream are often ineffective and rejected in the margins. Good ministry in the Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century also recognizes who is not present. It reaches to the margins to benchmark the work. For when we serve the margins well we serve everyone better. What we learn on the edge is put to good use in the center. To do this we need to consider new ventures with new partnerships.

There is a new program that launched this summer, the Illinois Healthy Marriage/Relationship Initiative, which provides marriage education to fragile families. The couples participating in this program are primarily poor, unmarried African-American mothers and their partners. The program is a collaboration of the Family Ministries Office with the Administration for Children and Families, Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services, Chicago Area Project, and Catholic Charities. Collaboration with any of these organizations is thinking outside the box for us. However, the make up of this coalition with all the partners is truly beyond anything we've ever done.

When considering the frightening degeneration of marriage among African Americans, one would think that marriage ministry with African Americans would be on the front burner of an evangelizing Church. In our 24 years in marriage education and leading a national apostolate to African-American marriage, my wife Terri and I recognize structural impediments in the Church for this work. While this may not be the case in all dioceses, it is generally true in the Church in America that Offices for Black Catholic Ministry and their equivalents don't do marriage ministry, and Family Life Offices generally don't do direct ministry to African Americans. So when it comes to this segment of our population, which is on the front line of the war that is waged on marriage and family life, no one is minding the store in the Catholic Church.

It's not that we don't care. But, we are blinded by structures that have unintentionally screened out this segment of our population for marriage ministry. It's not about what's in our hearts. If it were a matter of the heart, we would have dealt with this long ago. But, we are crippled in this area by the purview assigned by structures that miss this need in this population.

Let me share with you some wisdom from a prophet of our recent past, the Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, who was considered the spiritual director of the Civil Rights Movement. Please pardon the lack of inclusive language that typified texts of this era:

“It seems to me that experience reveals a potent half-truth; namely, that the world can be made good if all men in the world as individuals become good men. After the souls of men are saved, the society in which they function will be a good society. This is only a half-truth. Many men have found that they are caught in a framework of relationships evil in design, and their very good deeds have developed into instrumentalities for evil. It is not enough to save the souls of men; the relationships that exist between men must be saved also.

“To approach the problem from the other angle is to assume that once the relationships between men are saved, the individual men will thereby become instruments of positive weal. This is also a half-truth. The two processes must go on apace or else men and their relationships will not be brought under conscious judgment of God. We must, therefore, even as we purify our hearts and live our individual lives under the divine scrutiny, so order the framework of our relationships that good men can function in it to the glory of God.”<sup>8</sup>

The framework of our relationships with each other, other apostolates and agencies in the Church, and resources in the community at-large is an impediment to effective outreach to marriage in Black families. The solution to this problem is not to simply throw up our hands in frustration. Nor is it to dismantle the framework and start from scratch. What's needed is creativity and imagination that would have us look beyond convention and seeks new partners, new delivery systems and new levels of collaboration to transform the framework.

It was through an unlikely collaboration that brought the “good news” about marriage to people who would not otherwise get it. Going beyond convention connected us to new partnerships to advance this work. The Illinois Healthy Marriage/Relationship Initiative is not simply a different way of doing the same old thing. This is a fresh, vibrant and exciting ministry with people who are hungry for some good news, and with partners whose ways are a bit strange to each other. Karen Newton-Matza of the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services is leading a roundtable discussion on Saturday. She can answer any questions you may have about this

initiative. And before this conference is over, make sure you're on a first-name basis with Bill Coffin of ACF.

The work of changing structures and reconfiguring frameworks of our organization requires competent, creative and bold leadership. Part of the work of this conference is to call forth a leader to the prophets. There are two generous and gifted individuals from the membership who have stepped forward and have allowed us to place their names in nomination for the office of President-elect. Chris Paglia will introduce you to them at the end of this presentation. She will guide us through a discernment process to help us make a selection.

We Catholics identify ourselves as an evangelizing church. But, we struggle with it. Yet, if we don't successfully hand-off the faith to succeeding generations, we may become a disappearing church. Tonight I want to address another way we can be prophetic in our work.

I've heard teens complain that Mass is a rerun and that it's boring. Sadly, somehow they miss the richness in the meaning and action of the liturgy, which is greatest story ever told.

If our children and grandchildren are to lead the Church of the future, we need engage them in the Church of today.

Visioning the Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century requires not only prophetic voices, but also prophetic eyes, ears, noses, tastes and touch. As family folk we know that in the "church in the home" there are many stimuli to tantalize our senses.

In your mind's eye go to your favorite home setting. What do you see? Pictures on the wall? Neatness or clutter? What do you hear? Music? A crying baby? TV in the background? Children laughing? What smells? A home-cooked meal? Spices? Baked bread? Fresh herbs from the garden? A diaper overdue for changing? Can you feel the embrace of a loved one? The feel of a favorite chair? The knobby fingers of Grandma's hands? What does home feel like to you?

This is the Sacred mediated through our bodies—our first messages from God. And it happens long before we can articulate it, long before we understand it. These senses are factory-equipped with our bodies and a product of God's genius. Through our senses we engage life and experience wonder and awe, rapture and beauty. By way of our senses we are intimate with one another and with God. Through our senses faith is palpable.

Love and faith are not cerebral enterprises. Certainly we can think about love and think about God. We can study love and study God. But we haven't loved until we actuate it; we haven't loved until we do something. We don't really know God until we engage our full selves into the rapture of faith.

Faith is no a head-trip; it's what gets us across the Red Sea. It's what carries us through the death of a loved one. It's what gives us the audacity to promise to love forever when we don't know what's due tomorrow. It is what compels us to keep on keeping on after we have been spurned by death, divorce, broken promises and broken dreams. Faith is what transforms us into what we need to be for the sake of each other.

Our experiences in, with and for families gives us perspective that is so needed in the institutional Church. This is the gift of the Domestic Church for the institutional church. Over the years we have paralleled characteristics of the Institutional Church and the Domestic Church in perhaps too many ways. So, I won't belabor the comparison. However, I do want to stress this

important gift from family life to parish life—hospitality, which is one of “the big three” elements for creating an effective, evangelizing church, along with preaching and music.

The hospitality of the Domestic Church engages our senses without measure. It’s not limited. Hospitality in the home is on *kairos* time not *chronos*. It ain’t over ‘til it’s over! We squeeze it ‘til the last drop. The goal is to make people feel at home in our home. No one is rushed. Second helpings are expected. If some of anything is good, more is better. In the Domestic Church we maximize not minimize. Can you imagine a dinner party in which the hosts only provided the minimum of what’s necessary? Good hosts in the Domestic Church know how to pour it on thick and to rejoice in the presence of others. And we get so caught up in the experience of being together that we lose track of time.

I want to sow this seed among us tonight. As we live out our mission and prophesy to the Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, let us explore new ways to infuse the Church with the richness of home-life. Imagine what welcoming would be like. If singing one verse of a hymn is good, two is better, and—what the heck—why not sing the whole hymn? At baptisms everyone would get wet. Imagine our senses imbued by the symbols of our rituals. Imagine the greatest story ever told being reenacted with energy. Imagine liturgy done so well that you lose track of time. How might we help the experience of church at church to be more like being at home? This, too, is our frontier, to do church family style.

In closing, I want to briefly again look back to the early days of NACFLM. I wasn’t at any of the early conferences. But, I’m told that there was an exuberance that has been lost in recent years. I’m told that back in the day we worked hard, prayed hard and played hard. According to Jim Healy, we did more dancing in the old days.

So, here’s what I’d like us to do while we’re here at the Hyatt McCormick in Chicago. I want us to make ourselves at home. We have some great presenters who will enrich our work. So, let’s work hard. We have planned some good prayer-time so that we may pray well. Then, let’s pray hard. And we have built in some optional free time for us to play hard. Let’s make the free time at this conference like a house party. Let’s do it like we do it at home. Let’s put some chips in a bowl, put on some music, push back the coffee table and do some dancing.

Following this session we will be treated by the talent of Jim Bulanda, a singer who specializes in the repertoire of Frank Sinatra. On Thursday evening after the regional dinners, there will be a dessert reception in the exhibit area. On Friday we will take a cruise on the Spirit of Chicago. And who knows? There may be some unstructured opportunities to push back the coffee table and dance like David.

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<sup>1</sup> ??? NACFLM Conference. The conference name was “The Family: Discovering the Sacred in the Ordinary.”

<sup>2</sup> 1987 NACDFLM Conference in St. Louis, Missouri. The conference name was “Being a Voice for Families.”

<sup>3</sup> 2001 NACFLM Conference, which celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Familiaris Consortio*. The conference name was “Marriage and Family Life: Enduring Truths, Changing Realities.”

<sup>4</sup> 2000 NACFLM Conference. The conference name was “Holy Families: Myth, Meaning, Ministry.”

<sup>5</sup> NACFLM Conference in Louisville, Kentucky. The conference name was “Family Ministers are called to ‘Structures that Facilitate and Free.’”

<sup>6</sup> 1988 NACDFLM Conference in Phoenix, Arizona. The conference name was “Kaleidoscope of Changing Families.”

<sup>7</sup> 1990 NACFLM Conference in Chicago, Illinois. The conference name was “Winds of Promise: The Interdependence of Family and Parish.”

<sup>8</sup> Thurman, Howard,