



# CLEAR

Church-based  
Longitudinal Evaluation  
of AVANCE Results

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## Church-based Longitudinal Evaluation Results of a Comprehensive Marriage Program

Volunteer disengagement, marital distress both inside and outside the church, and leadership fatigue are surging in churches as they attempt to meet the ever-rising needs around them. Meanwhile, the pandemic has exacerbated these pain points, bringing them to the forefront of leaders' hearts and minds.

It is precisely these three critical needs that precipitated Family Bridges' Church-based Longitudinal Evaluation of AVANCE Results (CLEAR), a unique study which examined the effects of our AVANCE program on Hispanic parishioners from eight Catholic parishes in the Chicago metropolitan region. The churches enrolled in the program received capacity-building support via:

- Leadership development training
- A suite of marriage and family programs developed by Family Bridges
- Ongoing consultation and coaching to implement these programs among the couples and families in their parish and throughout the greater community

The program yielded significant positive outcomes for participants enrolled in the program including:

- Increase in positive attitudes towards getting married
- Improved relationship health and satisfaction
- Decreased likelihood and incidence of divorce
- Improved parenting skills
- A deeper level of involvement in parish life
- Greater satisfaction with the parish's role in supporting marriage
- Increase in leadership skills among volunteers
- Increase in volunteer and leadership capacity in parishes

The parishioners who participated in all six of the program offerings experienced a 12.6% increase in their marital health and satisfaction. The volunteers who helped implement the programs experienced a 24.2% increase in their skills and a 125.8% increase in their capacity.

The following report will, in detail, discuss the program's design in comparison to other models, provide a cost analysis, and explore the study's implications for marriage ministry. We begin with a brief review of the literature as it relates to some of the pressing issues the church faces today, drawing attention to the value of investing in comprehensive marriage and family programs.

What pressing needs are churches facing and how can these needs be met?



## Marriage and Family Needs

Using his own analysis of the National Survey of Families and Households, Dr. Bradford Wilcox, director of the National Marriage Project, concludes that "active conservative Protestants who attend church regularly are 35% less likely to divorce than those who have no religious preferences." These same trends hold true for Latinos. For example, in the National Survey of Religion and Family Life, 80% of Hispanic couples where both partners attend church reported feeling happy in their relationships. Although faith does not insulate couples from the many stressors that will inevitably tug at the fabric of their relationships, this evidence suggests that marriages within the church community tend to fare better than those outside the church. While most casual observers would agree that marriage and family life are, ostensibly, high priorities for the Christian community, a surprisingly low number of churches reflect this commitment within their financial infrastructure. In fact, only 28% of churches with congregations of 500 or more people have a designated budget specifically for marriage ministry. In our experience working with smaller churches and Hispanic congregations, many churches simply do not allocate the resources necessary to develop and maintain thriving marriage ministries.

Facts like these beg the question, where exactly are churches choosing to invest their ministry dollars? In their book *Endgame*, authors J.P. De Gance and John Van Epp make a compelling argument that much of that money is going to youth programs which, aggregately, have not yielded the desired outcomes in terms of securing youths' religious devotion through adulthood.<sup>1</sup> Pulling data from Barna Research, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, the Hartford Institute for Religion, and annual reports from the largest church ministries, the authors estimate that \$4 to \$6 billion are dedicated annually to youth programs in the U.S. Given the rising number of "Nones" (those who identify as having no religious affiliation), and the median age of youth leaving their faith dropping to 13 years old, De Gance and Van Epp argue that youth ministry efforts, while important and helpful to many, have failed to significantly influence youths' faith in a positive direction.

Investing in marriage and family programs instead, the authors argue, would position the church to minister more effectively, even in terms of evangelism. They go on to make a compelling case for the prioritization of marriage programs within the church by breaking down the latest research in the field. Brad Wilcox's research on faith and family life featured in the book *Soul Mates: Religion, Sex, Love and Marriage Among African Americans and Latinos* concludes that for Hispanics, more church attendance is linked to more and better marriages and less non-marital childbearing.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the research highlights the fact that strong families headed by married parents help men, women, and children realize the American Dream by helping them steer clear of detours: less crime, less teen pregnancy, more education, more work, and more income.

Pope Francis once said, "It's not enough to repeat the value and importance of doctrine if we don't safeguard the beauty of the family and don't compassionately take care of its fragility and its wounds...The church can proclaim the truth and assist families, only by immersing itself in real life, knowing up close the daily

trials of spouses and parents, their problems and sufferings, all the small and large situations that weigh them down, and, sometimes, block their journey."

Reaching this goal requires much greater intentionality and investment than simply preaching a marriage sermon once-a-year or even providing congregants with the occasional workshop series on the subject. Instead, marriage ministry must become an integral part of the church, embedded into its day-to-day rhythms, activities, and infrastructure



## Volunteer Engagement

For anyone familiar with church affairs, it likely goes without saying that the pandemic has had a negative impact on church attendance and on members' willingness and ability to perform volunteer work. This has left church staff and lay leaders strapped for help at a time when the need for spiritual and social support is at an all time high.<sup>3</sup> According to a Gallup Survey, the number of programs and events churches were offering dropped early in the pandemic and declined from 44% in 2017 to 35% in 2021. In Lifeway Research's 2022 Greatest Needs of Pastors study, faith leaders listed "committed volunteers" as being among the most significant needs for their churches. To gather this data, the survey asked 1,000 pastors from evangelical churches about almost four dozen needs. Of the 44 needs identified, 77% of pastors named developing volunteers and 68% listed training leaders and volunteers as some of their greatest needs.<sup>4</sup> Based on our experiences working with Catholic congregations, parishes are facing similar struggles. Even before the pandemic, many staff and lay leaders who were approached about implementing Family Bridges' comprehensive marriage and family programs within their parish objected, citing a lack of volunteers as a significant barrier.

*...investing in marriage and family programs... would position the church to minister more effectively, even in terms of evangelism.*



## Leadership Fatigue

Compounding the damaging effects of the pandemic and lack of volunteer engagement in churches, clergy members have been facing greater stress, loneliness, and an increasingly divisive political climate. A study released by Barna identified these struggles as some of the top reasons that pastors are considering resigning—facing burnout at unprecedented levels. In 2021, only 21% of pastors reported that they were considering resigning compared to 42% in 2022.

Burnout is a constant state of physical and emotional exhaustion due to work-related stress. Leaders that experience burnout often feel overwhelmed, discouraged, and ineffective, which can lead to depression, anxiety, and relational problems. While burnout in ministry has seen a sharp increase since the pandemic, it is not new. Responsibility overload, blurred boundaries, and cultural shifts are often cited as reasons for burnout in the literature on the topic. In our experience working with clergy over the years, we have found that many pastoral staff members are hesitant to delegate or form leadership teams to help with some of the required practical responsibilities. The various roles that pastors take on as teachers, counselors, accountants, chaplains, janitors, and managers lead to extremely busy schedules and higher stress levels. Delegating tasks to other leaders and volunteers requires trust earned over time. Some pastors are not accustomed to relying on a team, asking for help, or training others to absorb some of the responsibilities associated with leading a congregation. In addition, some pastors are leery of their church members due to the high incidence of trauma that some groups have experienced.





## About Hispanics and the Impact of the Pandemic

The Latino population in the U.S. has grown exponentially since the 1970s, reaching 60.4 million in 2019. Nearly 80% of Latinos are U.S. citizens, Latinos account for 27% of the nation's 50.6 million public schools students, and 70% of Latino college students are the first in their family to attend college. The labor force participation rate of Latinos (65.6%) is among the highest of any race or ethnicity.<sup>5</sup>

The pandemic has been especially difficult for Hispanics. Latinos were more likely to be unemployed because they were overrepresented in the service, hospitality, and leisure sectors that were devastated by COVID. As of March 2021, Latinos had a rate of COVID-19 hospitalizations that was 3.1 times that of white, non-Hispanic Americans and 2.3 times the rate of COVID-19-related deaths. This meant many Hispanic congregations saw reliable volunteers back away from their roles, as did other churches in the nation, due to the increased risk of illness or exposure at home.

COVID-19 realities similarly impacted our study as the volunteers trained to implement our programs faced more barriers to participation than usual due to new obligations at work or illness in their homes.



## What options are available to Hispanic congregations looking to implement marriage and family programs?

There are hundreds of marriage programs available, both secular and religious in nature, primarily in English. While some of these programs have been translated into Spanish, there is a dearth of content that has been "transcreated" with the specific cultural scripts of Latinos in mind. Imagine watching a movie or a T.V. show created in the 1960s with your children or grandchildren. You may be transported back to that era, laugh at the hairstyles, and enjoy the warm feelings of nostalgia it induces, but your children would likely feel a bit alienated by the cultural particularities of the time period. They might need help connecting and relating to the characters and grow distracted as a result. The same is true for content created with one audience in mind that is translated without contextualizing it for the new audience. Although the principles may be universal in nature, the stories and context for those principles can vary widely from culture to culture, rendering the concepts less effective when delivered without the proper cultural contextualization. After years of running some of the best marriage and family programs available at the time, we at Family Bridges developed our own suite of content based on programmatic outcomes and on our experience running programs in over 1000 churches with 22 affiliates in low-income, Hispanic communities.

Marriage and family programs come in a variety of formats and models including programs for crisis intervention—such as professional counseling, mentoring, intensive retreats, or group coaching. Some of these programs are based on clinical theoretical models and social science research while others draw primarily from Biblical precepts. Other programs are geared toward divorce prevention and include activities such as date night events, conferences, seminars, workshops, and couples' retreats. Moreover, many of these programs target specific cultural demographics such as programs for

youth, young adults, engaged couples, singles, or fathers.

These models also vary in terms of dosage provided (e.g., 2 hours for an event, 1-hour a week for counseling or mentoring sessions, 8-12 hours for a workshop series, 6 hours for a retreat intensive, etc.).

### Some of the most common models include:

**Counseling:** Couples pay anywhere from \$150-\$300 an hour (or a reduced rate) to see a professional counselor. Insurance does not typically pay for marriage counseling. Still, some family and marriage therapists will host a few sessions with the family or couple if one of the partners meets certain clinical criteria and is being treated for that primary diagnostic mental health issue (e.g., anxiety, depression). Some churches provide limited pastoral counseling sessions for free. There are also not-for-profit agencies that offer counseling sessions at a reduced rate. Mentorship programs are usually offered free of charge during which a mentor couple volunteers to come alongside the participating couple and encourage them in their trajectory toward growth.

**Special Events & the Speaker Model:** In the speaker model, the services of an expert or public speaker are retained and the speaker is paid or provided with an honorarium to address a specific topic or present at an event.

**DIY video-based or Small Group Discussion with Resources:** These include resources churches can access to lead a small group experience with other couples. They often include a DVD or access to a video streaming service wherein a speaker delivers a brief presentation, a facilitator discussion guide, and a participant guide. They also frequently include a book by the resource's developer that delves more deeply into the subject matter.

**Retreats/Getaways:** These events typically involve traveling to a destination, usually a hotel, wherein couples attend various conference style sessions delivered by experts in the marriage and family field.

**Data-Driven Consulting Models:** This model centers around leveraging data to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the needs of the church and of the surrounding community. Consultants then use this analysis as a road map to guide the church through the process of creating and/or strengthening their marriage ministry.

**Assessment:** Several programs focus on helping couples gain a greater sense of self-awareness and insight into their individual personalities and relationship dynamics. Couples enrolled in these types of programs typically take an online assessment that gives them a report about strengths and growth areas. From there, they are given the option to review their results with a certified counselor, participate in a marriage course, or undergo counseling to address any areas that require attention.

**Certificate-Based:** Certificate-based models are more intensive and require facilitators to attend a certification program specific to a certain curriculum. These certification programs often require extensive engagement such as 5 full days of training before the instructor can deliver the programs to their constituents.

The models described above are typically paid privately through a fee-for-service or subscription structure, by the organizer, by public or private grants/foundations, or through a combination of any of the above.





## Why Did Family Bridges Develop the AVANCE Model?

Absent from the models listed above are those that provide ongoing programming across a long stretch of time. Most of the models noted above come to a close. Yet, marriage is a lifetime covenant and couples move through many transitions within their marriage including personal struggles, demands of family, pressure from work, community changes, and socioeconomic fluctuations. Instead of being the strongest link in a community, many couples are driven toward isolation. Instead of tackling their giants as a team, they fight alone and become contemptuous of one another. When so much noise tears couples apart from the covenant vow, an event or workshop can provide inspiration and instill a sense of hope and encouragement. But what about when the event or workshop is over? How do they cope with the next storm in their lives? How do they remember the powerful lessons they've learned?

Since 2006, Family Bridges has sought to strengthen families and communities through a preventative approach implemented collaboratively among several organizations, with Family Bridges serving as the backbone. By training staff within these organizations to deliver a variety of marriage and family curricula via an assortment of program models (noted above), Family Bridges was able to execute a collective-impact strategy that saturated a city or community with marriage and family resources. Data collected from various measures showed strong positive outcomes from this strategy. Family Bridges' robust approach to recruitment and retention yielded high numbers of participants completing the full dosage of a given program at high rates. On average, 86% of participants enrolled in a workshop completed the full series. Participant outcomes based on data collected from pre-and-post surveys were also strong. Allan Hawkins, conducting a systematic review of the literature on programs similar to those delivered by Family Bridges, found that these generate significant positive effects on couple relationship quality and relationship skills. The programs also seemed to have positive effects on mental health and co-parenting.

Are these results long-lasting? While the literature confirms that many marriage programs do indeed generate positive outcomes, few studies exist that indicate whether or not these results are long-lasting. Outside of studies conducted with military families or students in universities, the literature concerning the impact of these programs over a sustained period of time is minimal.

Our experience working with low-income communities where families face multiple stressors, barriers, and challenges elucidated the usefulness of leveraging marriage workshops as the starting point of a journey, rather than as a destination. The programs help bring self-awareness to participants, increase their sense of agency in otherwise overwhelming situations, and help couples come together with renewed hope for their marriages. However, facing a continuous barrage of demands and struggles, couples may be more likely to fold under pressure unless an ongoing system of community support is established.

We realized that a comprehensive marriage support system with "deep roots and long branches" was required to make a lasting impact on couples struggling to overcome the challenges of married life across a lifetime. To make this a reality, we needed programs that would last beyond a speaker or single event and approach the work of marriage strengthening from a broader lens that encompasses the entire family.



## History & Timeline

In 2013, after seven years of running programs supported primarily by federal healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) demonstration grants in the Chicagoland region, the AVANCE program began to take shape. Rather than providing subgrants to partnering organizations so that they would deliver programs in community-based settings, Family Bridges launched its first efforts to engage directly with the leaders in these community-based settings to run the marriage and family programs themselves. We started the work in Joliet, IL and continued laying the groundwork for AVANCE as we saw these initial efforts begin to pay off in terms of impact and benefits to the community. In 2016, we partnered with the Culture of Freedom Initiative, spearheaded by J.P. De Gance out of the Philanthropy Roundtable, and expanded this program into Phoenix, AZ. Through this initiative, we were able to serve 40,000 Latino households over the course of three years using the AVANCE model. In the subsequent five years, we refined the model and expanded the reach of our services and programs overseas, including Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, and Spain.

### What makes this model unique?

1. Family systems approach that includes programs for the whole family
2. Faith-praxis approach that integrates biblical principles and relevant social science findings
3. Seeks to train local leaders to contextually adapt and deliver programs to the local community
4. Promotes program sustainability by incentivizing the formation of a marriage and family budget
5. Utilizes content and an approach that has been demonstrated to work both in the United States and overseas



## Do comprehensive marriage programs for Latino couples work?

The CLEAR study was born out of a desire to better understand the impact of the AVANCE model on participants, volunteers, and the church community. Instead of studying the outcomes of one curriculum and its effectiveness across a series of workshops, we sought to understand the impact of parishioner engagement with several years of marriage and family strengthening programs. To conduct the evaluation, Family Bridges retained the services of Nancy Lewis from the University of Texas as the primary evaluator for the project.

Can the model effectively train volunteers to meet the marriage and family needs of the church and community? Would the model help to ease the burden of responsibility shouldered by pastors/priests that—left unchecked—so often leads to burn out? Would the model be able to successfully engage a Latino audience, an often sought-after demographic by many marriage initiatives and programs across the country?



*"The CLEAR project is another successful program from Family Bridges. The outcomes of relationship education programming are consistent with the outcomes we see from nationally funded research projects. In brief, couples report gains in their relational dynamics, happiness, and communication. Additionally, the CLEAR project is building community capacity, allowing natural connections and assistance among neighbors."*

Jesse Owen, Professor, Dept of Counseling Psychology  
University of Denver





## Audience

We collected surveys from 1959 participants ranging in age from 18-86, with an average age of 42, across the parishes engaged in the study. The only incentive participants received for their involvement in the program or for completing the surveys was entry into a raffle for a couple of \$25 at the close of the study. Demographic self-report surveys yielded the following results:

 99 %  
Hispanic

 75 %  
Spoke Spanish at home

 76 %  
Had a high school education or less

 47 %  
Were employed full-time outside the home

 72 %  
Earned \$2,000 or less per month

Ranged in age from 18-86

 81 %  
Of participants were married

 68 %  
Of those not married were in significant romantic relationships

 75 %  
of the participants had been with their spouse or partner for more than ten years

Nearly all had children under 21 living with them

## Summary of Outcomes: Attitude Toward Marriage

*"Now I am very motivated and I will take all this information not only to help myself, but to support my kids and other couples."*

Participants experienced very strong gains toward having a positive attitude towards marriage as opposed to cohabitation, casual sex, or single parenting. The gains decreased slightly after the first three time points. This decrease is likely explained by the fact that the programming offered early on was focused on marriage while the focus of later programming shifted to other areas (e.g., parenting, finances). To improve this outcome in future iterations of the model, we recommend that program practitioners interlace booster sessions focused on marriage throughout the duration of the program.

## Relationship Health and Satisfaction

*"I feel that my communication with my partner has improved."*

*"I feel closer to my partner, now that we can talk."*

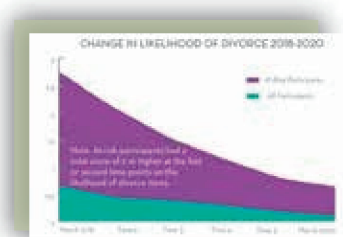
Relationship health and satisfaction were measured by items pertaining to mutual respect, dedication to the relationship, unity, communication, coping skills and enjoyment of the relationship. Participants showed a large and statistically significant improvement over time.



## Likelihood of Divorce

*"We have a lot of problems and we heard about this and we came."*

*"I am learning to take charge of my emotions and not blame anyone."*



Those who were married were asked to respond to items that research has shown indicate the likelihood that a couple will divorce soon. Couples' responses to these items show a statistically significant decrease in likelihood of divorce. This was especially true for couples who were at the highest risk for divorce at the beginning of the program. In addition, participants who remained in the program the longest saw the most significant decrease in the likelihood of divorce.

## Parenting Skills

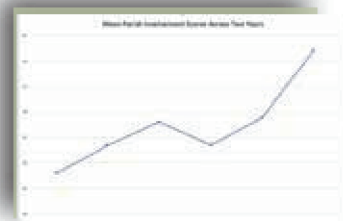
*"I want to get to know my son better, spend time with him and teach him more about life."*

Those who had children under 21 living with them were asked to complete survey items pertaining to their parenting skills. Average scores for those who responded to all items across the six interventions available increased by a statistically significant degree over time.

## Parish Involvement

*"I feel motivated to volunteer in the future at least in catechism classes."*

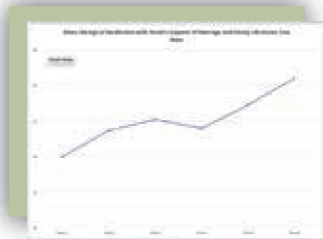
Parish involvement was assessed via survey items regarding mass attendance, participation in other parish activities, inviting others to attend mass, volunteering time to serve the parish, and having friendships and a sense of belonging within the parish. Statistically significant gains of nearly 4 points were observed across time.



## Satisfaction with the Parish's Role in Supporting Marriage

*"I have learned the importance to seek help when you feel you can't handle your situation."*

*"I have more information on how to face problems without so much drama."*



Items that assessed participants' satisfaction with how their parish supports marriage and family life showed statistically significant gains among participants who responded to these items across all time points. In addition, the average scores over time indicate a gradual increase, with those who remained in the program longer showing more significant improvements.

The results from the CLEAR study indicate that participants benefited from the program. Participants who remained actively engaged in the program across all intervention and program offerings showed the most significant gains. Creating a support system for healthy marriage and family life within participating churches is beneficial to congregants.



## Volunteer Outcomes

The project engaged 103 volunteers to help implement the programs. Volunteers organized and coordinated events and workshops, arranged child-care, and facilitated classes. To track outcomes related to volunteer engagement, the volunteers completed assessments concerning their interpersonal communication, time management, social and leadership skills, and volunteer capacity.

The demographics of the volunteers reflected those of the participants with results as follows:

- 100% were of Hispanic ethnicity, with 95% being born outside the U.S.
- 79% indicated Spanish as their language of choice at home
- 74% had completed a high school education or less
- 74% had earned \$2,000 or less in the previous 30 days
- The average age of volunteers was 46 and ranged between 22 to 69
- 84% of volunteers were married
- 92% had been with their spouse or partner for 15 years or more
- 82% had one or more children under 21 living with them

### Volunteer Skills

*"I feel encouraged."*

The volunteers showed statistically significant gains of nearly 20 points.

## Volunteer Capacity

*"I learned that you don't need degrees to facilitate a group."*

Volunteers gained, on average, more than 17 points from pre-test to post-test, which was a materially significant improvement.



## Cost Effectiveness Analysis

The CLEAR study tracked the resources required to run the AVANCE program to analyze its cost and cost-effectiveness as implemented in Catholic parishes in the Chicago metropolitan area.

Assuming that the church donates the facilities and that we do not include the value of the time invested by volunteers, the year-one cost of implementing AVANCE is \$7,983. The return on this investment can be estimated based on the data collected in the CLEAR project. This cost includes the one-time acquisition of \$4,500 in materials and training(s), and the remaining \$3,483 is the estimated in-kind donations made by volunteers and the value of the church facilities.



## How does this investment compare to other programs in terms of its impact?

Since most of the marriage programs available on the market are based on a one-time event or workshop series and not a comprehensive suite of tools that include volunteer engagement and training, it is difficult to make a direct 1 to 1 comparison between AVANCE and other marriage and family programs.

We can, however, make several observations about the AVANCE model as it relates to some of the other marriage programs and models Family Bridges has utilized over the years.

For 15 years, Family Bridges was the recipient of numerous federal grants totaling \$30 million. We delivered program services via a collective-impact approach, wherein we subcontracted with up to 22 organizations and churches across the Chicagoland region to provide relationship education across 700 sites. During the first five-year grant period, we served an average of 10,000 individuals a year (who completed an average of 8-16 hours of content). In the last ten years, we served an average of 5,000 people a year, due to the additional requirements and depth of services required by the updated grant programs. These grants ranged from \$2 million to \$2.5 million a year. This meant that it cost anywhere from \$200 - \$500 per person to complete an average of 8-12 hours of relationship education content.



Through a private funder, we received \$3 million across three years to expand the AVANCE model to Phoenix. We served 40,000 participants through this model, averaging \$75 a person.

The reduction in costs from the federally-supported model to the volunteer-supported/donor-supported model is noteworthy especially given the impact observed. The federally funded model of services relied on professional staff hired under Family Bridges and by each of the subcontracted organizations. It reimbursed trained contractual facilitators to deliver programs, provided supplemental support services such as child care, and even covered transportation costs in some cases. The federally funded model also placed restrictions on proselytizing or integrating biblical principles into the content delivered. The AVANCE model, on the other hand, did not reimburse churches or local facilitators for services (apart from program managers, directors, and master trainers/consultants), relying instead on volunteers to run the programs. The AVANCE model encouraged the integration of faith, biblical principles, and prayer into the program's implementation. The AVANCE program's impact, cost-effectiveness, and faith-praxis integration put it in an ideal position to be brought to scale beyond a city or single funder base.

What about in a church context? Are the robust results and comprehensive services provided by the AVANCE program worth the investment? It is true that the upfront costs associated with training, consulting, and coaching churches may be expensive for a small, local church. However, other models (such as small groups centered around video lessons) sacrifice longevity and volunteer development for a smaller upfront price tag. An event can draw a crowd, bring inspiration, and provide some much needed hope, but what happens once the speaker leaves and that initial buzz of excitement fizzles out? Where do couples go for continued support and care? All of these models provide powerful touchpoints but can easily lose their effectiveness and become unsustainable in the long-run.

Moreover, many of the church's most pressing needs, particularly regarding volunteer engagement, marriage enrichment, and even burnout, warrant a comprehensive solution that may make the initial cost a worthwhile investment.



## Recommendations & Discussion

The families served by the AVANCE program wrestle with the pressures of communities fraught with violence, social unrest, and poverty. Financial demands mean many spouses juggle multiple jobs to make ends meet. Children and youth often assume the role of cultural breakers in the home, meaning that they become responsible for translating and bridging the gap between their families and the dominant culture. These economic and social pressures are above and beyond the typical pressures that couples face in relation to money, parenting, extended family, sex, mental health and the management of household responsibilities. The tendency for most married couples navigating the different developmental stages of their relationship is to drift

apart into isolation as the differences in personality, experiences, and viewpoints escalate in response to rising challenges. For Latino couples, the acculturation experience and membership in a community with elevated incidences of trauma, domestic violence, and addiction create additional layers of complexity. Still even in the face of so much adversity and struggle, it is remarkable that for Hispanic families, family values remain a protective factor.

Successful, happy couples who know how to manage the tensions in their marriage well have learned to intentionally invest in their relationship. They have created rhythms in their relationship where they seek to forgive one another, accept each other's influence, air out their differences, come together for a common purpose, and serve one another instead of living for the self. A community of other couples and families who can be counted on for support to manage the external and internal pressures, hold each other accountable, and come together towards a common goal breaks the isolation and brings healing. Local churches can promote healing communities for couples to gather, learn, and build each other up. And as indicated by our research, when couples remain in community across a sustained period of time, they experience exponential growth.

Imagine what can happen when the church has vibrant marriages and flourishing families. Imagine what can happen to a community that is saturated with couples and families who come together to help one another honor their covenant vows and raise purpose-driven children. Imagine what can happen when couples and families come together for mutual support and the deepening of faith.

And now imagine what can happen when these same couples are equipped to lead within their church and gain the confidence to facilitate enrichment groups. Would this provide clergy and other paid staff with a larger pool of servant lay leaders who could help carry the burdens of ministry?

The CLEAR study did not specifically examine the effects of the AVANCE program on clergy burnout. Future studies are needed in order to explore this topic further. Additionally, numerous studies have examined the benefits of volunteerism on an individual's health and well-being, finding links between volunteerism and a reduction in chronic pain and depression and an improved sense of purpose.<sup>6</sup> Further research is required in order to determine if the AVANCE program's volunteers experience any of these additional health benefits as a result of their participation.

Any churches or other organizations seeking to replicate AVANCE's comprehensive marriage and family programs in their own settings may benefit from the following key learnings:

**Find a Local Mobilizer:** A well-trusted community leader in each city and region where programs are established is the key to gaining a receptive audience with church leaders and local stakeholders.

**Recruit a Local Consultant:** A local trainer, advocate, and consultant who provides support, training, and coaching to the churches and the volunteers is essential to program success. This local consultant does not have to work independently. In fact, they could work under the umbrella of an existing, well-established organization that is trusted within the community and could even offer or refer others to additional wrap-around services and support to the church community.

**Provide Ongoing Programs:** The outcomes were at their strongest when couples continued to participate in programs across time. Try to ensure that programs are not delivered in isolation but that there is a continued effort to invest in a comprehensive marriage and family strengthening strategy with longevity.



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## End Notes

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